

*So this was No. 6.  
This was Elyurias.*

## CHAPTER 1 That which I say I saw

Gracious my lord,  
I should report that which I say I saw,  
But know not how to do it.<sup>1</sup>  
-*Macbeth*, Act V Scene V

They were falling. Falling, almost straight down.

It was faster than anything Shion had imagined. He knew it was impossible, but he heard the sound of the wind. It was the same wind from that stormy night.

It was September 7, 2013—Shion's twelfth birthday. The Holy City of No. 6 had been directly hit by a hurricane. The rain was pounding on the ground, and the wind was roaring. The trees in his yard careened wildly, and leafy branches broke off and whipped through the air. It was an extremely large and severe hurricane, a kind not seen in recent years, but he was sure that no one living in Chronos felt threatened or anxious. Shion and his mother, Karan, had been the same.

This was No. 6. A utopian city, the results of human wisdom and cutting-edge technology. And in that utopia, Chronos was in the highest ranks among the luxury residences, a town where only the chosen ones were allowed to live. Mere natural disasters could not disturb it.

Everyone had believed so without a doubt. They had been allowed to believe otherwise.  
*That stormy night, I opened my window.*

*Why?* he sometimes thought. *Why did I open that window? Was it because I was excited at nature's madness, and I was stimulated, or I was stirred by a violent impulse—was that it? I certainly did open the window, and I yelled. I screamed as if I were pouring out all of the ferocity inside me. If I didn't scream, I felt like I would shatter to bits. In my own way, I felt a fear that I would be entrapped and tamed into domesticity by No. 6.*

*A vague fear—maybe something that you wouldn't be acquainted with, Nezumi.*

*I felt like I was suffocating. I was scared. I wanted to scream.*

*That was why I opened the window—wasn't it?*

*No.*

*That's not it.*

*You called to me.*

*I heard that voice—your voice—calling me.*

*It ducked through the wind, tore through the rain, and came to me.*

*You called me, and I was called by you.*

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<sup>1</sup> Shakespeare, William. *Macbeth*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005. 157.

*That's why I opened the window. I flung it open wide to the outdoors.  
I extended my arms in search of you.*

*Would you laugh? Would that breathtaking smile cross your face as you sneer at me? Would you shake your head with exasperation in that graceful way of yours?*

*'Meaningless fancies. An intolerable mass of self-consciousness, like a half-baked artist's work'—would you spit those words at me? You probably would. Go on and laugh. You can dismiss them as my delusions; I don't care.*

*But it's the truth.*

*You called me, and I listened. I reached out, and you caught my arm. I opened the window so I could meet you.*

*That's our truth, Nezumi.*

A noise was ringing in his ears. It wasn't the whirl of the wind. It was the sound of sliding through a plastic tube. But what if this tube was not a garbage chute, but a steep slope that led straight to Hell?

Suddenly his consciousness began to fade. All the wounds he had suffered on his entire body grew hot and throbbed. The strength left him.

*Going to Hell doesn't seem so bad when it's with you. Should I stop resisting, then? Why don't I just give up on struggling, on fighting, on wanting to live?*

*If I let myself black out now, I'll be free from this pain, this weariness.*

Shion closed his eyes. Darkness fanned out before him.

*Just like this... just like this....*

"Ugh," Nezumi groaned softly. It stabbed Shion's eardrums. Like lightning flaring up in a night sky, it tore the darkness away from his consciousness.

*Damnit. Shion bit his lip and inflicted pain on himself. He scolded himself severely. You bastard, what were you thinking? You can't give up now. Live. Survive. We have a place to return to, and we have to get there in one piece.*

He had made that vow. He had vowed to himself that he would protect Nezumi through to the end, and survive this ordeal together.

His hand slipped. Nezumi's blood was caked on his palms. A black mouse leapt out of his pocket and ran along the garbage chute wall. It wasn't falling; it was definitely running.

*Tsukiyo, I'm counting on you. Tell Inukashi that we're alive.*

Shion jammed both feet against the wall and gritted his teeth. He focused all the strength in his body on his legs. His bones creaked. Their falling speed decreased somewhat. His bones continued to creak as if they were screaming from the pain.

*Damnit, I won't give in yet.* Shion chewed his lip still harder. He did not taste the blood. His tongue was already numbed to its rusty metallic taste.

*Inukashi—Inukashi, help us.*

*Inukashi!*

Rikiga fell into a fit of coughing. He recovered and breathed raggedly.

"Inukashi, I can't do it anymore. I'm at my limit."

"Limit of what?" Inukashi said tersely.

"I can't breathe. Are you planning on suffocating me like this?"

"What good is it to me if I suffocate you, old man? You gonna leave me a giant inheritance? The most you'd probably leave behind is a pile of empty booze bottles."

"Hmph. See if I even leave you that."

But even while griping, Rikiga did not try to flee. He was still stacking mattresses under the opening of the garbage chute. With each mattress he stacked, he had a coughing fit, gasped and wheezed, and griped some more.

Smoke had saturated the hygiene management room. The collection area was no exception; it was almost engulfed by thick, grey smoke. The dogs lay low on their bellies, their breathing hushed. Even the little mice who had been squeaking clamorously at each other were now huddled motionless.

The limit—Rikiga was right, the limit was near. Inukashi himself was choking on the smoke, and the air wasn't passing through his throat well. His heart pounded frantically.

*It hurts.*

*The air is stuck in my throat.*

But he was not miserable. He was not in despair. On the contrary, a part of his heart was pounding, soaring in anticipation.

*What is this smoke? This hot air that blows at me from time to time? The restless buzz that comes with its snarl?*

*A clear precursor to destruction. The Correctional Facility is raising its last dying shriek.*

Many times Inukashi felt like barking out of excitement. He wanted to bark and howl until his throat trembled. Just once, he opened his mouth wide, but he only choked on the smoke that rushed into his mouth.

He licked his lips while carrying the mattresses. *If I can't bark, the least I can do is lick my chops.*

What he thought was absolute was crumbling before his eyes.

*Will you look at that. Is that what life is, Nezumi? Shion? If it is, that means you guys taught me what it is to be alive. You never know what happens. There's nothing absolute about what humans create.*

*I won't thank you; you guys have caused me too much hassle. You'll never hear a word of thanks come out of my mouth.*

*But I owe you praise. I'll give you my best compliments. I'm actually impressed that you guys turned out as decent as my dogs are. You guys are really something. I have new regard for you. I'm impressed—just a tiny bit.*

The smoke assaulted his eyes, his throat, and his nasal passage. A tear rolled down his cheek. It was just the smoke stinging his eyes.

*You come back, you hear me? If you don't, I can't praise you. Hurry, hurry, while my breath can still last me. Hurry.*

Inukashi! Someone called him. He whirled around. Rikiga was kneeling on the floor. He was holding a white cloth to his mouth, and coughs were racking his bent back.

"Call me?"

"—What?"

"Did you call me, old man?"

"What would I... do that for?" Rikiga wheezed. "You want me to... give you one last kiss or something?"

"Knock it off. That's creepy, even for a joke."

"I'm... past the point of... caring whether it's creepy. Really, I can't... stand this anymore..."

"That's a shame. My heart goes out to you, man. But it's a bit too late to repent. A man as corrupted as you isn't gonna get any closer to Heaven, no matter how hard you try."

"Damnit... still smart-mouthing me... are you?"

Explosions. Smoke pouring into the air. The dog with patched fur raised its head. Terror swam in its eyes. But the dogs did not move. They did not try to flee.

*They're waiting for my orders.* They were waiting for Inukashi's command, fighting their fear of death. Dogs never abandoned their master. They never betrayed him.

*I can't murder them like this.*

"Go." Inukashi pointed at the entrance door. "Escape by yourselves."

But the dogs did not get to their feet. They remained lying on their stomachs, watching Inukashi.

"What? I'm telling you to leave. Get out of here, quickly." He met the eyes of the patched dog. Its eyes were serene. The shadow of fear that had crossed his eyes moments ago was wiped cleanly away.

"I see..." *You won't move if your master doesn't.*

"Aren't you gonna... tell me?" Rikiga coughed and wheezed. "Aren't you gonna... tell me to run?"

"You? You can get the hell out of here if you want to. You wouldn't be any use if you stayed."

"Inukashi."

"What?"

"Do you... plan to die here?"

"Die? Why would I?"

"There's barely any... chance that those two... Shion and Eve... are going to come back. If you're gonna gamble on that slim chance... if you're gonna gamble and choose to stay... that's like killing yourself."

*No way. Heaven and earth can turn upside-down, but I'm never gonna kill myself. I'd be missing the spectacle of a lifetime.* The destruction of the Correctional Facility was only the beginning. It was only the preamble. The devastation of No. 6 itself was what came next.

No. 6 was falling apart.

*I'll get to see the very moment with my own eyes. And you're telling me I intend to die? You must be kidding me. You bet I'll live to see No. 6's last. I'll thoroughly enjoy its final act.*

*Heh heh heh.*

Lighthearted laughter rang at his ear. No, it was in his ear—inside his head. Someone was laughing. It was carefree and joyful, yet an icy laughter.

"Who is it?"

His gaze darted about instinctively and caught a small black shadow passing by.

*A bug?*

The shadow was soon swallowed up by the smoke as it disappeared. The laughter ceased. *Were they both hallucinations? There's no way a bug could be flying around in this smoke.*

*Shiver.* A chill ran down his spine.

*Screech, screech, chit-chit!*

*Cheep-cheep-cheep-cheep-cheep. Squeak!*

Suddenly, the mice began to cause a commotion. They raised their voices again, but much higher this time, and dashed around on top of the mattresses.

Inukashi held his breath.

A small object came tumbling out of the chute. It was not trash. It was a small black mouse.

"Tsukiyo." Inukashi tried calling it. The black mouse flew through the air; it leapt straight for Inukashi. It latched onto Inukashi's hastily extended arm, and squeaked insistently.

*Cheep cheep cheep cheep! Cheep cheep cheep cheep!*

It was Tsukiyo; there was no doubt about it. It was the same little mouse that Inukashi himself had commanded to go to Nezumi. His blood stirred. His body grew hot.

"Wake up, old man."

"Eh?"

Rikiga blinked feebly, still squatted on the ground. His eyes were bleary and red. His face was sooty, his hair was mussed, and he looked like he had aged a good decade.

"They're coming back."

"Eh?"

"Coming back. Hold onto the mattresses."

"R-Right." Rikiga got to his feet in a surprisingly swift move.

The wind was howling.

As Inukashi and Rikiga held the mattresses down, they felt a heavy impact almost simultaneously. The mattress sank, almost sending Inukashi's slender frame flying. He summoned all the strength in his body to cling onto the mattress.

He had instinctively closed his eyes, but now he opened them carefully. He saw two bodies lying in a heap.

"Shion, Eve!" Rikiga yelled before Inukashi could speak. "You alright? Hey! You alright?"

"Gh..." Shion's arm jerked. A part of his white hair was dyed with his blood. Blood was streaming from his shoulder and his leg. His clothes were torn, ripped, and hanging in places. Inukashi couldn't tell if the dark flecks all over his clothes were from blood or the trash in the chute.

*Horrible.* Inukashi kept his eyes wide open as he swallowed his spit, which smelled like smoke. *You guys are a mess. I think even the undead would look a bit better crawling out of their graves.*

"...Inukashi." Shion lifted himself up and turned his face to Inukashi. His cheeks were streaked—whether it was with sweat or tears, he didn't know, but they engraved prominent marks on his skin.

"Shion, you're alive." *You made it back alive.*

"Inukashi, save Nezumi..."

"Nezumi? What about him? What—" Inukashi was barely able to hold in the scream that threatened to burst from his throat.

Nezumi was lying on the mattress, totally still and unmoving. His clothes were soiled reddish-black from his shoulder to his chest, and he gave off the smell of blood.

"Nezumi, hey, what's wrong?" Inukashi asked tentatively, but there was no answer. On

his pale, bloodless face, only his lips were vividly red. To Inukashi, they did not look human at all. Nezumi had always had a face that was somewhat otherworldly, but the face in front of him was one of a doll. A skillfully and meticulously crafted piece.

*But dolls don't bleed.*

"To the hospital—hurry," Shion screamed, as if wringing the voice from his throat. Explosions rocked the foundations of the building. The whole room shook with its impact. A draft was coming in from somewhere, and the smoke wavered and thinned slightly. The shaking did not stop.

"We need to get out of here! This place is coming down!" Rikiga yelled as he wrenched Nezumi away from Shion's arms. He slung the boy over his shoulder.

"Shion, can you run on your own?"

"I can."

"Right, then run. Get outside."

One more sound, more violent than before, rang out, and the door to the Correctional Facility was blasted away.

"Run, run! This place won't hold much longer!"

Rikiga broke into a run, bearing Nezumi. Tsukiyo dove into Shion's pocket, and the two mice, Hamlet and Cravat, leapt onto a dog's back.

"Get out, goddamnit! Get out of here!" Rikiga's bellows slammed into him.

His back was blistering hot. Inukashi turned around to the flames filling his vision. Beyond the blown-open door, the Correctional Facility was burning.

*The door blew apart? Wasn't the door between the Correctional Facility and the Hygiene Management Room supposed to be made of some special alloy that even a small missile couldn't penetrate? And it's been blown apart like it's nothing?*

For less than half a second, he stood stupefied. Flames slithered. A fire-coloured monster was writhing on the floor. It writhed and twisted towards the corpse of the black dog and swallowed it whole. It was the same dog that had been shot to death protecting Inukashi, but Inukashi was unable to give it a proper burial.

*Sorry.*

"Inukashi, hurry!" Shion grabbed his arm.

"Get out, get out! We have to get out of here!" Rikiga continued to bellow. He seemed to be turning his yelling into energy to move forward. Inukashi was pushed along by the heat and the hot air from behind, and quite literally stumbled into the outdoors. Fresh air flowed into his body.

*Oh, I can finally breathe.*

"Not yet. We can't stop yet. Keep running." Shion's grip tightened. Inukashi was dragged along by his arm. The gravel crunched under his feet.

"Ow! Shion, that hurts! Stop—" Inukashi abruptly closed his mouth. His eyes had met with Shion's.

His eyes, dark with a wash of purple, were the same as always. They were completely unchanged. They were bloodshot, and the eyelids were swollen, but they were Shion's eyes.

Yet Inukashi closed his mouth and felt his body stiffen. He did not know why. The boy in front of him telling him to run seemed a complete stranger. He was someone Inukashi did not

know.

*No. Those aren't Shion's eyes. Shion, what's gotten into you?*

But the confusion and foreboding vanished in an instant. Shion was right—he could not fall to his knees just yet. His instincts sounded the alarm. This physical sensation was much more reliable than any cutting-edge security device.

*Get out of here, run. Get out of here.*

Inukashi leapt to his feet, and ran as fast as he could. From behind, he could hear the roar of a beast. Yes, those were not just explosions. A monster was baying. It was raving madly.

*Get out of here, run. Get out of here.*

*Run and survive.*

Tsukiyo had crawled out of Shion's pocket and was clinging onto his neck. It had opened its tiny round eyes as wide as it could, and was staring over at Inukashi.

*You're kinda cute.*

Dogs' eyes and mice's eyes were alike, and all such innocent beings were loveable. Inukashi thought of Shionn. He had not forgotten about him for a moment. He had only pushed the infant to a corner of his heart so as not to remember him when he was not supposed to.

Shionn was innocence itself. He was so small, yet he had so much inside him.

*The dogs are probably managing alright. I left him with a dog that's birthed and raised a ton of her own puppies. Apart from her, there are a few other caring females in waiting. He's probably sleeping right now, protected by his loving nurse.*

"Shionn, my baby," he murmured. Just then, Rikiga, who had been running in front of him, disappeared. He heard a shout, and the sound of a body falling over.

"Whoa!" Shion tripped over Rikiga's fallen body. In turn, Inukashi's feet were swept from under him by Shion, and he was slammed to the ground. The pain racked him to his very core.

He could not speak. Lying on his stomach on the ground, he could only draw strained breaths. He could feel the frozen ground on his cheek. It was soothing. It had not the iciness of winter, but a cold that harboured a faint hint of warmth and softness.

Spring was coming. A late spring was starting to arrive in the West Block.

No. 6 was probably fully furnished with flowering parks and streets lined with cherry blossom trees, but one would be hard-pressed to find even a single flowering tree in the West Block. But the weeds growing on the shoulders of the road faithfully opened their petals year after year. Flowers usually sparked no interest or intrigue in Inukashi since they were not edible, but once in a while they pulled at his heartstrings.

*Oh, I've lived through another winter,* he would think. Then, for a fleeting instant, in the back of his mind he saw faces of those who had frozen to death that winter—the old beggar lady he had been familiar with; the man who had hung around the ruins for a good while; the woman who was so emaciated, it was hard to tell her age—but they disappeared as quickly as they had come.

Spring was coming. Would those flowers bloom again on the side of the road?

"Nezumi," Shion gasped. He lifted himself up, and crawled over to Nezumi's side.

"Nezumi, Nezumi. Can you hear me? Nezumi—"

Inukashi also lifted himself up. They were lying in the shadow of some shrubbery. When was it that he had hidden himself here, witnessing Getsuyaku being shot to death?

It felt like it had happened only minutes ago, but at the same time a thousand years back.

"Nezumi, open your eyes. We're out. We were able to get out."

Shion's voice sounded like the wind that whistled through the ruins. It was mournful. It froze the hearts and ears of those who listened.

Inukashi peered over Shion's shoulder at Nezumi's face, and compressed his lips into a hard line.

*Is he dead? The statement pushed his lip up and threatened to spill out. Shion, is Nezumi dead? Or is he just acting? Who's he playing? Macbeth, Hamlet, or some other weird name that you guys used to mention?*

*Hey, Shion. Don't tell me Nezumi is really—*

"Gh—" Nezumi's eyelashes trembled very slightly.

"He's alive," Shion shouted as he lifted Nezumi in his arms. "He's alive! Hurry, to the hospital!"

*Yeah, you're sure alive. You can't trick me, Nezumi. There's no way you would be wiped out that easily.*

"Old man." Inukashi called to Rikiga, who was squatting on the ground. His car was parked beyond the shrubs. It was a piece of junk, a step away from scrap metal, but it could still chug along with a couple passengers. They had taken this gasoline-fuelled car to get here, after all.

"Old man, hurry up."

"—I know, but—"

Rikiga held a hand to his mouth, and stuck his head into the bushes. The sound of retching reached them.

"Dumbass! This is no time to be puking! Hurry the hell up, come on!"

Inukashi grabbed the man by the belt of his trousers and dragged him out of the bushes. Almost as if in answer, an even larger flame burst out of the window of the Correctional Facility. It threw a bright light on the surroundings. Black smoke formed a thick stream as it rose into the sky. It engulfed and blacked out the stars.

*Can you see these flames from No. 6, too? What would West Block residents be thinking right now as they watch the flames burning the night up?*

*Look at it, it's falling. A place that used to mean Hell for us is collapsing. It's gonna be wiped out, just like that, even quicker than our marketplace.*

Rikiga got to his feet unsteadily. He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, and wiped the sweat on his brow while he was at it.

"Why do I... have to go through this? Besides, you know, I—"

"Enough crap," Inukashi interrupted. "No one's listening. If you've got time to bitch and moan, get the car moving."

"Moving where?" Rikiga snarled. "Eh? Answer me this, Inukashi. Where are we going to take someone who's hurt so badly he's as good as dead? Answer me, I'd like to see you try! If you can give me an answer, boy, I'll take you wherever the hell you want."

Inukashi drew his chin back and fell silent. He could not answer.

He was not intimidated by Rikiga's angry outburst. He genuinely did not know. "To the



hospital,' Shion had said, but there were no medical facilities in the West Block. There were seedy witch doctors and questionable medicine shops, to be sure, but they had all been blown clean off their foundations during the Hunt. But even if they were still around, they would probably not have been of much use.

Rikiga continued his furious tirade.

"Someone who's bled this much is going to need a decent amount of medical equipment. Where do you suggest we find that, huh? Nowhere here, for sure. You can scour the whole West Block and you won't find a single damn syringe. You should know that best, Inukashi."

Inukashi looked down at Nezumi. His lips were parted slightly. He was breathing. But—

*This is the end, huh? The strength withered in his legs, and he felt like he would collapse. This is it, Nezumi. There's nothing more we can do.*

"There is." Shion stood up. "There is a hospital."

Inukashi and Rikiga turned to each other. They peered into each other's eyes.

"Hospital—? Where?" Rikiga asked in a hoarse, scratchy voice. Shion's gaze slid to the side. On the other end of it was the special alloy wall, illuminated brightly by the flames.

"Inside."

"No. 6!" Inukashi and Rikiga's voices overlapped.

"Yes. We'll find plenty of hospitals there."

"That's absurd!" Rikiga blurted. "How are we going to get inside? My car won't even be able to pass the gates. They'll register it as a suspicious vehicle and it'll get blown up within a few metres of even entering. Impossible. Absolutely impossible. Wait, I know! Shion, how did you escape from No. 6? Can't we go back in that way?"

Inukashi almost interjected in agreement. If Shion had come out that way, perhaps he could get back in through it. *That old man is a quick thinker once the alcohol's gone out of him.*

But Shion shook his head firmly.

"We can't do that. That would take too much time. And Nezumi wouldn't last on the strength he has left. We have an hour—we need to get him to the hospital within an hour..."

"But how are we going to manoeuvre through the gates?"

"We don't need to."

"What?"

"The Correctional Facility is destroyed. All its functions have shut down. That means the gates mostly likely aren't operating, either."

"You're planning to enter No. 6 through the Correctional Facility's private gates?"

"Yes."

"Shion, you... do you know where the Correctional Facility's gates are?"

"I don't know for sure. I've heard, though, that they're directly connected to the Correctional Facility."

Rikiga's throat contracted as he swallowed his saliva. Inukashi found himself doing the same. The back of his throat burned from the smoke.

"You're right." Rikiga's voice grew even more hoarse. "You're absolutely right. It's directly connected. About a hundred metres beyond the gates, you'll find the back entrance of the Correctional Facility. That's where you two were carried through during the Hunt. But you probably couldn't see anything from inside the cargo container you were loaded into."

Inukashi realized he had unknowingly clenched his hand into a fist, listening to Shion and Rikiga's conversation.

Getsuyaku had also been coming and going through those gates. Inukashi had heard him complain countless times about being treated the same as prisoners. Inukashi had given the man an offhand answer.

"Prisoners are killed once they get caught. They'll never come back out through those gates again. But you're coming and going through them every day. Not to mention you're getting paid to do it. That's way different from being a prisoner."

"Well, I guess, now that you mention it. I wouldn't be able to go home if I were just a prisoner, huh," Getsuyaku had shrugged and smiled ruefully.

*But in the end, he was the same. He was shot dead in the blink of an eye, just the same as a prisoner. Even worse—like an insect.*

Inukashi remembered Getsuyaku's rueful smile. He closed his fist more tightly.

"Then we can take the car to the gate from here, right?" Shion asked.

"We can if there are no obstacles along the way. No one is crazy enough to get close to the Correctional Facility now, apart from you lot."

"Rikiga-san, lend me the keys to your car, please."

Shion extended his scratched and bloody hand. Rikiga's face twisted visibly. Deep creases appeared between his eyebrows.

"What are you going to do with them?"

"I'm going to drive. You two can stay behind. The keys, quickly."

"Bullshit!" Rikiga bellowed angrily again. "Have your eyes rotted and fallen out? Don't you see those flames? You idiot!"

The Correctional Facility barely remained standing, spewing flames and black smoke. The alarms that had been ringing so loudly had died out somewhere along the way, and only the ferocious wind sounded as it was drawn in by the flames.

"We've barely gotten out of the Correctional Facility in one piece, and you're going to prance right back in?" Rikiga said incredulously. "This is no time for jokes. How many lives do you think you have?"

"I don't plan on going inside. The gates are outside of it."

"A hundred metres away. *Only* a hundred metres. The gates aren't a safe zone, you know."

"That's why I'm going. Usually we wouldn't be able to get through, but right now, the gates are nothing but an opening."

"The car runs on gasoline. If you happen to drive into fire and it catches—"

"Hand it over," Shion commanded in a low voice, cutting through Rikiga's yelling. Commanded. That was indeed how the words came out. Shion had neither snapped, nor yelled harshly. On the contrary, it was a quiet and heavy utterance.

Rikiga retreated half a step.

"Hand over the keys."

It was the voice of a ruler giving orders to his subject—it was unmistakable.

Rikiga rummaged through his pocket and extracted a worn silver keyring. His fingertips were trembling.

"...Stop it," said a voice even lower than Shion's. To Inukashi it seemed to spring from the depths of the earth. A chill ran through his spine. Nezumi had slowly lifted himself up.

"That's enough. Stop it."

Inukashi could hear his words clearly.

Nezumi's voice. Nezumi could use ten, twenty different voices, but what Inukashi's ears had caught was unmistakably Nezumi's natural voice.

"Don't... stay away, Shion."

Shion did not answer. He did not even try to look at Nezumi. Instead, he bowed his head to Rikiga.

"Rikiga-san, please. Give me the keys. Please, I'm begging you." It was not an order, but a plea.

This was the Shion that Inukashi knew. Intelligent, gentle, faithful, airheaded and clumsy Shion.

"Just give it to him, old man," Inukashi said with a deep sigh. He didn't know why he had sighed. There were a lot of things he couldn't make sense of. He couldn't even understand himself.

"Shion, I'll go with ya." The words spilled out along with his sigh. He surprised himself. *Look at me. I'm so reluctant to put my life in danger, I'm so desperate to survive, yet here I go saying 'I'll go with you'. I can't believe myself sometimes. And what's worse is that it isn't even a lie or bravado. I really mean it. I told him I'd go with him, and I meant it. What on earth is wrong with me? I can't understand myself. What's going on, what's going on, what's going on? Oh, hell.*

"Fine." Rikiga clicked his tongue. "If that's what you want to do, then do as you will. You guys probably aren't the type to listen to your elders, anyway."

"Don't lump me in with the airheaded young master, man," Inukashi protested. "But, oh well. There you have it. The votes are in and it's two to one for driving into No. 6. That's that. Too bad, Nezumi."

"Three to one." Rikiga clenched the keys. "I'm coming along for the ride."

Inukashi blinked and glanced at Rikiga. The man also blinked repeatedly, his eyes ringed with soot, dirt and sweat.

*What on earth is wrong with me? Why did I say something like that? And I actually meant it, his facial expression seemed to say. Inukashi felt like laughing and crying at the same time. What a weird feeling. He felt scared, yet exhilarated. Dismal, yet optimistic. Your heart can be weird like that.*

"It's my precious car," Rikiga said. "I won't tolerate you trashing it. Besides, I doubt you snot-faced kids would be able to drive. Young'uns these days get better and better at mouthing off, but can't do anything for themselves."

Rikiga mumbled complaint after complaint. It was most likely because he would end up sighing if he didn't talk.

Rikiga's car was a minivan. It was dented everywhere, and the right side mirror was bent. It was an outdated gasoline-fuelled model that could easily have been displayed in a museum in No. 6.

But it had a sturdy frame, if anything. The engine also had a lot more power than it looked. Being able to drive a car in the West Block was a symbol of a certain level of wealth, and

hence there was always a risk of being ambushed by thieves on the road. Inukashi remembered listening to Rikiga boast that for this reason, he had modified the car to be as durable as a tank.

Inukashi sat in the passenger seat, while Shion sat in the back holding Nezumi. The dogs climbed into the car last.

"Why do you have to bring your dogs? They'll stink up the car."

"They smell way better than your alcohol. My dogs are loyal to their boss. They'll go wherever I go. Just like how these tiny mice are faithful to their boss."

The mice were huddled together on the seat. They sat noiseless, as if they had forgotten how to squeak.

"Dogs and mice, huh. That settles our destination, then: the zoo. Hmph, what a fun drive this is going to be."

Rikiga turned the ignition. The engine sputtered comically, and the car seemed to give itself a shake.

"Let's go. I'm going to floor the gas, so you better prepare yourselves."

The car lurched forward. It continued to mount in speed as it made straight for the Correctional Facility.

"Hey hey, old man. It seems like you're being a little reckless about this."

"How can I not be? Look at what I'm doing. Damn it, what the *hell* am I doing? Why the hell am I doing this?"

"Because you're in love with Eve, duh."

"What?"

The back gates to the Correctional Facility had been thrown open. Perhaps some people had escaped through them. These gates had always been tightly closed, refusing all who came near, but now it was open and exposed. Flames spiralled up behind them, and the building played its melody of destruction. Inukashi could hardly believe that this wasn't an illusion.

*Is this reality?*

The gates to the Correctional Facility had opened, and the special alloy door had been blown apart.

Things that were not supposed to be happening were happening. Things he had believed would never happen—no, had been made to believe would not happen—were inverted. There was no good or evil. No justice or injustice.

*This is reality.*

The car veered around the back gates, nearly scraping against them, and gained speed. Inukashi saw the security gates beyond.

"What!?" Rikiga yelled. "What did you just say, Inukashi?"

"You were totally into Eve, old man. You're still a passionate fan, aren't you? You're head over heels. Or else you wouldn't be able to sprint like that while holding him. Those were some good moves out there on the field, risking your life. Bravo."

"Knock it off. Once we get to a medical clinic, the first thing I'll do is sew that mouth shut. Sew in that rotten tongue of yours while I'm at it."

"Why, that's just splendid. An honour of honours to be able to get treated at a clinic in No. 6."

"Say all the crap you want!" Rikiga gripped the steering wheel.

Inukashi snapped his eyes open, and shrank back. The gate was approaching at an astonishing speed. No, they were approaching it.

"It's burning," he murmured. He had resolved not to voice it; he had restrained himself from putting anything he saw into words. But he could not help it.

The gates were burning.

They were engulfed in flames. Small explosions, still not as large as the ones in the Correctional Facility, were ringing out. Fragments of glass and metal battered the car ruthlessly. Each time, the car made an unnerving *bump-bump* sound. The sounds were like the car's screams themselves.

*It hurts. I'm scared. I'm gonna die.*

"It's burning." Once he put it into words, terror gripped his whole body. It was like the roots of his hair were standing on end. But one point of curiosity slipped through the wave of fear washing over him, and clung to Inukashi persistently.

*How can it crumble so easily?*

He understood that Shion and Nezumi had utterly destroyed the core of the Correctional Facility. He was in awe at their accomplishment. But there was something wrong with it. It happened too fast, too easily. *Was it always this fragile? Is it supposed to just collapse like that?* He did not think for a bit anymore that No. 6 was an absolute existence, or an omnipotent ruler. It was the same as that special alloy door. It had bent out of shape, crumbled, and now lay in a disgraceful mess.

*But—but this is No. 6 we're talking about here. An artificial city, the epitome of human intelligence and scientific technology. The Correctional Facility is another No. 6 that's supported its darker workings. It's No. 6's bastard child, an evil spawn that's a spitting image of its parent.*

Evil things often possessed evil powers. *Couldn't it have stood its ground somehow? Is it going to be defeated just like that, without a choice?*

*Heh heh heh.*

He heard it again. That lighthearted but terrifying laughter. It was more frightening than the flames in front of him.

Inukashi screamed. Rikiga gave a shout beside him almost at the same time. This one was from the fear of being on the brink.

"Ahhhhhh!!!"

They plunged into the wall of fire. The dogs continued to bark incessantly. Inukashi did not close his eyes. He kept them open, and watched the flames swallow them up. They were not a uniform colour. The vermillion of sunset, the crimson of blood, the red of flowers all blended together. They shone golden, then sank into a muddy red.

A part of the windshield shattered. Hot air blasted at them full-on in the face. He smelled burning hair. The heat evaporated the moisture from everything around them, and they began to shrivel up.

*Oh, so we're gonna die here. So that's how it is, he thought. I'm going to die with them after all. In the end, I'm just...*

"Elyurias," said a voice from the back seat. Inukashi could not tell if it was Shion's or Nezumi's. He did not know what the word meant. Was it an incantation? It sounded too strange to be someone's last utterance. But then again, they were always strange, weird, ridiculous

people from the beginning. *This doesn't surprise me now, but... it's nagging at me.*

*Elyurias? What the hell is that?*

His hair singed. His skin was being roasted. It was hot. *Goddamnit, it's hot.*

The flames wavered. They wavered, and seemed to retreat just slightly. The heat also receded just slightly, and he could breathe a little.

*Huh? Why? Inukashi blinked. Are the flames retreating on their own? No way. That's impossible. Absolutely impossible.*

"We're out! Rikiga roared with laughter. He laughed as if he had gone mad. "We're out! Take that, bastards! We're out safe! Ha, ha, ha ha ha ha ha ha! Take that! We've done it! Ha ha ha ha ha ha!"

Tense laughter echoed inside the car.

*Ha ha ha ha ha! Ha ha ha ha ha! Ha ha ha ha ha!*

They had gotten through. He was right; they had certainly gotten through.

The land around them wild and barren, with few grasses or trees. It was no different from the West Block. But at least in this wasteland, there was a straight, two-lane road. A lush, green forest probably awaited them at the other end. In the dark, Inukashi could only make out a black mass, but Inukashi's nose caught the rich, earthy smell of the trees.

Maintained roads and lush forests—all were things he could never see in the West Block.

*We've made it inside No. 6. I've stepped inside, for the first time in my life.*

"Look at that. That was quite something. Ha ha ha ha ha! Only natural for Almighty Mr. Rikiga! I'm quite the hero. Ha ha ha ha ha, I did it! Take that, bastards! Hooray for Mr. Rikiga, hip-hip-hooray! Ha ha ha ha ha!"

Rikiga's voice cracked even more, and whined in a higher pitch. Inukashi swept up a liquor bottle that had been lying at his feet, and knocked Rikiga over the head.

"Ow! What was that for?"

"I went easy on you. Your head hasn't cracked open, now, has it?"

"Idiot! How dare you act like that to a hero!"

"I calmed your hysterical fit. That's really sad, old man. Even my dogs and the mice are calmer than you. What's so heroic about what you did? You went on a reckless joy ride, and you jumped through fire. That's it. Ugh, for shame."

"Shut up. Can a dog or a mouse drive a car? I'd like to see them try. You think you've got a right to say whatever you want—"

Once Rikiga finished yelling to his heart's content, he gave a great sigh.

"Shion, what are we going to do now?" he said. "I have no idea what it's like inside No. 6. I've been away for ten years."

Inukashi could feel Shion shift in his seat.

"Lost Town is just a little ways in from here. The outskirts of No. 6 are beyond that forest, and further beyond that are the central districts. The forest is there to hide the walls from the citizens."

"I see. So they can go on living without being reminded all the time that they're surrounded by a wall."

"Yes."

"And how about medical facilities? Where should we go?"

"Go straight through the forest. There will be a fork, and if you turn right, there should be a small clinic."

"Will that be good enough? Eve's hurt pretty badly, isn't he?"

"He's been pierced by a rifle bullet."

"Wouldn't you need a pretty sophisticated facility to treat that?"

"Maybe," Shion said. "But that clinic is the closest. They have a surgery. You can only find fully-equipped facilities in the city centre. We don't have time to go there, and this car might get caught in inspections along the way. They get stricter as you get closer to the centre. Also, you need a citizenship card to get into most medical facilities."

"You don't have one?"

"I threw it away."

Shion paused for the length of a breath, and continued.

"It was a useless card to have, anyway. Lost Town residents aren't allowed into most central facilities."

"You can't get in?"

"No. The type of ID you have—in other words, your position as a citizen—decides what facilities you can use, where you can live, and what you can ride. It's not only with clinics; Lost Town residents aren't even allowed into the central facilities for daily shopping needs or entertainment. When it comes to places with the best equipment, the number of allowed people gets even smaller.

"That thorough about it, huh?" Rikiga commented. "I'd heard about it before, of course, since I did business with high officials. I did get the idea that there was some vague uncertainty and discontent brewing in that city, and that a hierarchy was in place. But to think that such an old-fashioned system was being enforced... I would never have imagined. What a surprise."

"High officials are elites close to the summit of the hierarchy. They don't know what it looks like from the bottom."

Inukashi snorted.

Rikiga was right. He was surprised, or rather, struck dumb in amazement. He was taken so off-guard, all he could do was growl.

*So that city, No. 6 not only divided people inside and outside with a wall, but they even sorted people within by creating more tiny differences?*

The wealthy and the poor; the haves and have-nots; the superior and the inferior; the strong and the weak—No. 6 drew countless lines that had formerly never existed between humans, pruning and selecting to its liking.

*Why was such a system ever needed? Who needed it?* If you were unlucky, you were dead. If you were lucky, you were alive. The line between good and bad luck was the only thing that divided people in the West Block.

"And the hospital we're headed to right now doesn't need an ID card?"

"It does. There isn't any place in No. 6 that doesn't need an ID."

"Then—"

"The doctor at the clinic used to be a customer at my mother's store."

"Karan? Her store—a bakery, right?"

"Yes. He used to come once or twice a week to buy bread for lunch."

"What's his name?"

"I... don't know. We all called him "doctor". That usually sufficed."

"You don't even know his name?" Rikiga said in disbelief. "Are you sure you can trust this shrink? Is he good-hearted enough to treat someone who doesn't have an ID card? Who's not a citizen of No. 6?"

"I don't know. But he's our only chance."

Rikiga lapsed into silence. There was no time to waver or hesitate.

As they approached closer to the forest, the rich smell of vegetation and earth grew stronger. Could anyone in No. 6 see the Correctional Facility burning where they were, or was it blocked out of sight by the forest?

*He's so calm.* Inukashi thought about Shion. Shion's words were composed and undisturbed. The usual Shion—he was not. If Shion were as he normally was, he would be fraught with hesitation, fighting desperately against his own heart.

When did he learn to repress all of his emotions and put on an act of calmness? Had something in Shion changed, like a cloth that loses its colour after being passed through water?

Inukashi licked the back of his hand. It was blistered from a burn.

He was afraid to turn around. If he turned around and focused his eyes, he would see the bloodied figure of Nezumi, and inscrutable Shion. He knew it was just his imagination, but he was afraid. The back of his neck was so tense, he felt like it would seize up.

*Well, I'll be damned if he changes.* He repeated inside his head while licking the blister. *Shion is Shion. He'll never change; I'll be damned if he does. Just like I'll keep on being who I am, just like how I'll never change, there's no way he'll ever change.*

The car entered the forest.

"Oh—!" Shion cried out softly. "The sky... it's burning."

Rikiga also let out a muffled shout, and leaned out. The car swerved, almost hitting the streetlights standing between the trees.

The sky was burning.

The sky, darkened even more deeply by the night, was coloured by the flames. The Correctional Facility was not the only place. No. 6 itself was spewing fire. Places across the city were being engulfed in flames.

*What's going on?* Inukashi turned around, his mouth still hanging half-open.

"Hey, what just happened?"

Shion sat frozen. He sat still, holding Nezumi in his arms without even blinking. Only his lips moved imperceptibly.

"...It's burning."

Far away, they heard the sound of a blast. It came from behind, not in front—the direction they had just escaped from.

"The gate—" Inukashi fell speechless. No further words came out. He closed his mouth, unable to believe his eyes.

*What the hell is about to happen?* It was neither excitement nor expectation. It was not fear. He was being toyed with by emotions that he found hard to describe.

Shion spoke.

"We'll be out of the forest shortly. Then, we'll be in Lost Town."



## CHAPTER 2

## But once

Cowards die many times before their deaths,  
The valiant never taste of death but once:  
Of all the wonders that I yet have heard,  
It seems to me most strange that men should fear,  
Seeing that death, a necessary end,  
Will come, when it will come.<sup>2</sup>

-Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar* Act II Scene II

The street was filled with people.

Hundreds, thousands of people were running in the same direction. They flowed like a giant river. But a large river would have meandered gently; it would not be full of murderous intent. It would not surge as these people did now.

Karan stood with her back to the wall, watching the people go by. The rows of small houses lining the street had all tightly shut their doors and turned off their lights.

Were their residents huddled quietly inside, or were they somewhere in this flow of people?

On her back she felt the cool emptiness of the abandoned houses.

"To the Moondrop!"

"We have a right to live, too!"

"Show us the mayor! Why are you pointing guns at your own people?"

"We won't stand for this!"

That was all Karan could pick up. The rest became angry yells, shouts, calling cries and responses that mingled, twisted and tangled with each other in the air.

The sheer energy of the sound was so great, Karan was seized by a floating sensation. Karan dug her heels in, and pushed her back up harder against the wall. If she didn't, she felt like she would be pulled into this flow, this cyclone. Her body and her soul would be carried away.

"Aghhh!!!"

Suddenly she heard a scream that was a pitch higher than everything else. It was very sudden. It pierced the roaring din and impaled her eardrums.

A heavyset man standing diagonally in front of Karan fell on his side, clutching his neck. For an instant, the people ceased their clamour.

"H-Help... help me, someone... help..."

The man stood up, stumbled for a few steps, and collapsed again. His hair turned white in seconds, and his body began to wither. The man stopped moving.

"There it is. It's happened again. Another casualty!"

"We're going to be next!"

---

2 Shakespeare, William. *Julius Caesar*. *Eighteenth Century Collections Online*. 31.

"Do something! We have to do something quickly!"

The buzz of the crowd shook the air, and people began to flow again. No one tried to pick up the fallen man and carry him out of the crowd's path. People stepped on him, over him, around him, and pressed forward.

Spring was still far-off, the night was still chilly, but beads of sweat adorned everyone's face.

Karan also felt the sweat streaming down her cheek. She was unbearably thirsty. She felt like she was fainting; her hands and feet were growing numb, and she almost lost consciousness. She bit down on her lip.

*I have to go back. Lili and everyone are waiting.*

With her back still to the wall, Karan edged her way back to her shop. She moved against the flow of people.

The storefront was pitch-dark. She entered an alleyway and made for the back. A light was on—in the storage room, which had doubled as Shion's bedroom. Karan cleaned it every day so it would be ready anytime Shion came home.

That room was lit.

*Phew.* She let out a long breath that surprised even herself. Although it was impossible for anyone to have heard it, the door to the storage room opened just slightly. A small white face peeked out, and looked around cautiously.

"Lili."

"Ma'am!"

Lili ran up to her. "I'm so glad you're back, ma'am. You know, I had this feeling, I really did. Like you were outside. I could *actually* tell."

Karan embraced Lili's body tightly. She was almost brought to tears by the softness and warmth of her small, young body.

"Was Madam Koka alright?"

"Yes..."

"Was she crying?"

"Yes."

Karan had taken Koka back, the mother whose son had been shot to death. Koka had sunk to the ground by her son's body with vacant eyes, as if she had forgotten how to cry.

Every word of consolation was meaningless.

*If Shion had gone through the same thing—*Just the thought of it racked her chest. She could vividly feel Koka's despair. That was why Karan could not find the right words to say to her.

"Ma'am Koka laughs, like, in this huuuuuge voice. And she laughs all the time," Lili chattered.

"I know."

"Do you think she'll laugh for us again? Is she gonna be able to, ever?"

Lili's face clouded over. Karan could not answer. How could anyone stand up again from the despair of losing her most beloved?

She softly placed her hand over her breast pocket. It contained three letters. They were from Shion and from a boy called Nezumi. They were scribbles, almost too short to be called letters.

*Mom, I'm sorry. Alive and well.*

*Shion is safe, worry not. Escaped to West Block. Be wary of Bureau surveillance. Any replies to this mouse. Brown brings news of safety, black brings news of change or abnormal occurrence. -Nezumi*

*Reunion will come.*

*Nezumi*

Words could not describe how much these letters had supported her—supported her, and kept her alive.

*What will Koka turn to for support to live on?* She didn't know. She could not answer Lili's question.

"Ma'am?" Lili looked up at her. Karan nodded and flashed her a vague smile.

*I'm sorry, Lili. I've been alive for so much longer than you, and I can't answer any of your questions.*

She heard a muffled sound in the room.

"Lili, where's Renka? Where's your mother?"

"Mommy's looking at the computer. Uncle Yoming is in there."

"Yoming?"

She held Lili's hand and walked inside. She closed the door and locked it. The room doubled as storage, and there were sacks of flour, sugar, and raisins piled high along with jars of honey and jam in rows.

In a far corner was Shion's bed, and beside that was an old desk. Shion's desk. In the drawer was a half-written report that Shion was planning to hand in.

Renka was crouched over the desk, engrossed in the monitor of the outdated computer.

"Renka," Karan called. Renka twitched slightly and turned around. Her bloodless face was illuminated by the dim light.

"Karan..."

"Renka, what's wrong? Has something happened?"

"Karan, it's my brother." Renka straightened up awkwardly. "Look." She pointed at the computer screen.

Yoming was there. His fist was raised, and his expression was fierce. He was definitely Yoming, and yet he seemed a total stranger.

"Now is our time to stand!" he declared. "If we do not stand up now to destroy everything, we will be slaves forever! Yes, slaves! You all must realize by now how No. 6 has deceived us all this time! How much unfair abuse we have suffered; how much exploitation we have endured! It has always been this way. It has always been this way, comrades. This city's horrific history is steeped in bloodshed. Let me tell you, comrades, about the hundreds of lives that have been banished to eternal darkness because they disputed the authorities; because they objected; because they resisted. Let me bring everything to light. Look, comrades!"

Yoming swept his hand towards the wall behind him.

Countless faces appeared on it. Youth, the elderly, young boys and young girls, even infants. A girl in her wedding dress; a muscular labourer; a thoughtful elderly gentleman; a

smiling elderly lady; a sleeping infant; a girl running this way, laughing; a middle-aged woman with her eyes cast down; a young doctor wearing a stethoscope—many, many faces appeared before them.

Karan's heart thudded loudly.

*Da-dum. Da-dum. Da-dum.*

Shion was there.

He was facing this way, with a slightly sheepish grin on his face. It was his first birthday since coming to Lost Town, and Karan had taken a picture.

"Aw, please, can we not take photos?"

"Why not? It's an occasion to remember."

"Fine, but no pictures outside."

"Oh, you're more bashful than I thought."

Such was the conversation that passed between them as she took the picture.

"I want to know what kind of boy your son is. Can you tell me what he looks like?"

Karan had shown Yoming that photo among others on his request. He had copied the data without her even realizing.

"Look at these people," Yoming continued. "They are people who have been taken away by the Security Bureau, never to return again. They are people who have been murdered by No. 6. Unbeknownst to you, comrades, the authorities have been obliterating anyone who poses an inconvenience to them. You didn't know that, did you? No, you didn't. But I am not blaming you, comrades. You have already come to know No. 6's true identity. You now know what kind of people the authorities really are; who the mayor really is. The question now is what we will do from here on out.

Comrades, I am not talking about the past. I am talking about the present. Even while we stand here now, fellow citizens are dying. They are dying horrific deaths. A terrible disease is sweeping the city. Already, many citizens—good and innocent citizens—have suffered at its hands. But the authorities have failed to take action. Instead, they have given themselves an effective vaccine and so are able to keep living lives that they do not deserve.

Comrades, did you know? A considerable number of vaccines is still being stored in the Moondrop. But the authorities are doing their best to hide it. They won't give those vaccines to us citizens. They have paid enormous expenses to develop them, and they don't want to hand them out to just anyone—that's their standpoint. Have you ever heard of anything so ridiculous?

Comrades, I disclose to you an even more shocking truth. All of this is fact: this is something I have been investigating in secret for years. This is the truth, and it is a horrific reality we must face. The upper echelons of No. 6, including the mayor, have been predicting this situation for many years—that a mysterious disease was going to spread throughout No. 6. That was why they were developing a vaccine in secret, while we citizens were kept in the dark. And when the situation becomes dire, they are only interested in saving a select few. And look! Open your eyes wide, and look at what is happening!"

Next, an image of a mob flashed across the white wall. They were people who had crowded in protest around the Moondrop. They were all shouting something, their expressions tense. A red ray of light streaked across the corner of the screen. At once, every face took on an

expression of horror, and people frantically began to flee. Next, an image appeared of soldiers at arms and several bloodied people collapsed in the square. The video looked like it was from a hidden camera; the footage was blurry and kept shaking sideways and diagonally.

"What is this, comrades? Do you know what this is called?"

Yoming's voice rang out, loud and pronounced.

"Yes. Our fellow people have been murdered. Killed like vermin. The authorities have pointed their guns at their own citizens. Is that something that ought to be forgiven? Of course not. We cannot let them go for what they did.

Comrades, let us stand! Put the power of the government back into the hands of the people. Take it away from the Moondrop, which has rotted through completely. We will not stand to be trampled on anymore. We will not be suppressed anymore. We are humans. Let us take back our freedom and safety. To battle, to battle, to battle, comrades! We must rise up in arms! Surround the Moondrop! Destroy No. 6! To battle, to battle, to battle!"

It was a jarring cry. Renka turned the power off even before his yell began to taper. Her legs curled under her as she dropped weakly to the floor.

"It's been like this forever. About once every five minutes, my brother's speech gets played."

Renka held her swelling belly, and her mouth twisted. The noise out on the street grew even more agitated. It hit Karan and Renka like waves crashing onto the shore.

*To battle, to battle, to battle, to battle, to battle.*

*Rise up, rise up, rise up, rise up.*

"Karan, what's gotten into my brother? Why is he saying things like that? Why is he screaming?" Renka covered her face with her hands.

"Mommy." Lili huddled close to her, and placed a gentle hand on her mother's knee. "Mommy, don't cry."

"I'm fine, Lili. I won't cry. But—but you know, Mommy is a little scared." She then said to Karan, "My brother was such a gentle person, but he... he looked like a completely different person... no, in fact, he *has* become a different person. He's changed ever since my sister-in-law and her baby went missing after being abducted by the authorities... he's changed. From that day, the only thing in my brother's heart has been—"

"Revenge."

Renka lifted her face at Karan's words, and opened her mouth slightly. She looked like a gold fish with not enough air.

"Yoming wants revenge on No. 6. He's wants this city completely destroyed."

"Yes," Renka answered. Her voice was croaky. "Yes, you're right, Karan. My brother never said it. I never heard the word 'revenge' come out of his mouth. But I *knew*. I'm his little sister, after all. I could tell how he'd changed, I could tell he had vowed in his heart to get revenge. That's why, some day... I was afraid this would happen. I was worried.. but scared. I was really scared."

Renka's lips trembled. Her large eyes turned watery, and she turned even paler. Karan looked from Renka to the blank black screen.

*Lies, she thought vehemently. I won't say all, but half of Yoming's speech is made of lies.*

Certainly, the authorities had placed its citizens under its vigilant regime, and ruled

them in a manipulative and ruthless way. It was true that Karan and most of the citizens had been living blinded and oblivious. Yes, many people had been sacrificed; an unidentifiable disease *was* spreading like wildfire; the authorities *were* failing to come up with any effective solution; they *had* opened fire on citizens—it was all true.

But his claim that the city had foreseen this situation—this unfathomable, horrific situation—and had launched the development of a vaccine—that was false. If by some chance this was true, there was no reason for them not to vaccinate the citizens. If they had a store of vaccines in the Moondrop, it was unthinkable for them to withhold it.

What good did it do No. 6 to kill its own citizens? If anything, it would do more damage than good. They were in this situation precisely because they had no vaccine to combat the disease. Right now, they were in the middle of a worst-case scenario.

*Besides—besides—Shion is not one of them. Shion will come home. Shion isn't someone who is "never to return again". Yoming's words were half truth, half lies. There is no vaccine in the Moondrop. That was a lie. He's a perfect demagogue.*

Yoming was manipulating, encouraging, and agitating people's fears, along with their long-festered suspicion and discontent towards No. 6.

*Yoming, please don't. This is wrong.* She thought of Koka, who had refused to move from her son's side. She remembered her unseeing vacant eyes, frozen open from her overwhelming grief.

The soldiers had been the ones to shoot Koka's son to death. But Yoming was part of the cause. Yoming was deeply involved with the brutal death of a man who had been referred to affectionately as "Good Guy Appa".

The truth was noble, as long as it remained the truth. That was how it made the world turn. But now, Yoming was not speaking the truth. He was twisting it conveniently to match his intentions.

"My brother has changed," Renka said in despair. "It started gradually after my sister-in-law went missing, and when this commotion began, he changed completely."

"You're right," Karan said resignedly.

Yoming had been waiting. He had lain low, waiting for an opportunity—not to flourish onto the scene, but to exact revenge on No. 6.

And this was the opportune moment.

"To battle, to battle, to battle, to battle!"

His cry rumbled deep in her ears. It stirred the soul like a magnificent soundtrack.

Karan overlapped her hands over her chest.

*No, Yoming. What you're doing is wrong. What will come of involving so many of these nameless people? What will you try to create from their sacrifice? Can you see them? Can you see each and every person's face as they die bleeding? Have you ever tried to look at the life each of them has lived, and the days that they've spent?*

*Yoming, now is not the time to fight. We don't have a second to lose; we have to find a way to deal with that unknown disease.*

*We have to protect lives, not use and dispose of them. If you loved your wife and your son, then you should respect life all the more.*

*Do you—do you plan to cross that line?*

*Please. Cast your thoughts not to the group, the people, the citizens, but each and every person as their own! Make a place in your heart for me, Renka, Lili, Koka, Getsuyaku, and all the people whose names you don't know!*

*You're a human, aren't you? You're not No. 6.*

"Karan," Renka said in a feeble voice.

"What is it?" Karan's voice also sounded faint to her own ears.

"You know... I've wished for a long time that you and my brother would be together."

"Why, Renka—"

"My brother liked you. I think he was in love with you. When the topic would turn to you during dinner, he'd always turn very quiet. But he looked so happy. I haven't seen my brother look so happy in a long time."

"Renka..."

"Then, someday you and my brother would get married, Shion would come home, I would give birth to my baby, and Getsuyaku and Lili would visit you so you could get a look at the baby, too. You and my brother and Shion would kiss the baby in turns, congratulating it, and you, Karan, would bake a cake to celebrate. Getsuyaku and I would stretch our savings a little to give out "Fortune Bread" to everyone in Lost Town. They'd be little rolls that you made, Karan, and we'd hand them out as a symbol of our happiness. We'd package them in little bags, tied with a cute ribbon.... We'd share a little bit of happiness with everyone. Both Lili and the baby would wear a ribbon, too. I would put a white bib on the baby, and a light pink apron on Lili. Lili would carry a basket full of "Fortune Bread" and we would walk down the street. Everyone would come up to greet us, saying, 'Congratulations, Renka. Congratulations, Getsuyaku, Lili.'"

"Renka."

"That's all I wish for. That's not greedy at all. Is it, Karan? Is it being greedy?"

"Of course not."

It was small—such a small wish.

"Then why won't it come true? Why does everything have to fall apart and disappear? Why?" Unable to contain herself, Renka let a sob escape her lips. Lili embraced her mother firmly with both arms.

A small, small wish. But it could not come true.

As long as they lived in No. 6, all their hopes were like towers of sand. They melted away all too easily. *Then, what are we to do? What must we do so we can build our lives on firm ground instead of sand?*

*If No. 6 isn't an idyllic city, then what is 'ideal' supposed to be? How are we to create an entirely new world, so different from No. 6?*

"Renka, Yoming isn't working alone, is he?"

"No... there must be other people who have gone through the same thing—who have lost their family."

"And Yoming is with them, right? They must be acting together."

"Yes, I'm sure of it."

"Do you have any idea where they might be?"

After some moments of thought, Renka shook her head.

"No. It looks like they're in some basement studio. He would need proper equipment to make that video clip."

"You're right. But neither of us know where that is. We have no way of meeting Yoming."

"Karan," Renka held her hand out. Karan grasped it. "What will I do? What should I do, Karan?"

Karan could feel a presence. It pressed upon her from the street.

*To battle, to battle, to battle, to battle, to battle.*

*Destroy it, destroy it, destroy it, destroy it.*

*Kill, kill, kill, kill, kill.*

"Let's think about it, Renka." She cupped her hand gently around Renka's belly. Then, she touched Lili's cheek.

"We still have hope."

"What?"

"Hope. The baby in your belly, and Lili—they are our hope. We have to do our best so that these children will have a real world to live in. Right, Renka? We have our children. Not all our hope has been taken from us."

"Shion, too." Renka wiped her tears away and nodded. "Shion is our hope too, isn't he? And a big one, too."

"Mm-hmm. Thank you, Renka."

"He's coming home soon," Lili blurted without warning. "Onii-chan's coming home soon. I can tell."

"Why, Lili." Karan scooped Lili up and kissed her on the cheek.

"It's true," she insisted. "He's really coming home."

*Shion is... coming home.*

*Please come back, Shion. And Safu, you too.*

*Please come home safe.*

*I pray for you.*

Her prayers led also to the boy named Nezumi, whom she had yet to meet.

*I would love to meet you, Nezumi. I would love to see you, and thank you. I want you to know how grateful I am for your support. Shion, Safu, Nezumi. You, too, are my hope. My very large hope.*

*Come home to me.*

No. 6's city hall, known informally as the Moondrop, was surrounded.

The citizens crowded the square and overflowed into the streets. Each shouted his own words of protest. Their voices melted into one, and boomed so loudly it seemed to shake the canopies.

But no matter how loud the clamour got, it did not reach the mayor's office. The office was on the highest floor of the building, with soundproof walls and windows. Whatever happened outside never disturbed the constant silence inside.

"Why? Why has something like this happened?" The silence was broken as the mayor spun around and shook his fist.

"Fennec, will you calm down?" the man in the lab coat answered. "You should be the last to be agitated." He sank deeply into the leather chair and crossed his legs.



*Pitiful*, he thought as he mentally clicked his tongue. *He has always been like that. Ambitious but timid, and a coward.* The man switched his legs and recrossed them.

*But he has been able to come this far precisely because he is so timid and cowardly. He opens his heart to no one. He trusts no one. He is suspicious of everything and acts cautiously. A fennec indeed, the world's smallest desert-dwelling fox.*

The mayor paced the room. He flitted back and forth busily. The thick carpet absorbed almost all of the noise generated by his footsteps.

"It wasn't supposed to be this way. Citizens are supposed to gather at the Moondrop to celebrate the Holy Day and the greatness of No. 6, are they not? To think it would turn out like—like this, I—how could such a thing have happened?"

The man gave a deliberate sigh. The mayor stopped pacing, and deep creases appeared on his brow as he looked over.

"Please, Fennec," the man said. "Compose yourself. All that's been coming out of your mouth these days is 'why' and 'such a thing'. I'm starting to get rather bored of it."

"Answer me. Why has this happened?" The mayor's voice grew strained. The man gave another sigh.

"Because you haven't given it your all."

"I haven't?"

"Yes. You mobilized the army, but you only cleared them away with a handful of firearms. Surely you wouldn't call that decisive action. Nothing is more effective than the army when it comes to subduing the imbecilic masses. That was not the right way to use them. You should have used them with more flourish, more decision, and an iron finality."

"You're telling me to mass-murder my citizens?"

"They'll prostrate themselves to you before they get themselves killed. They'll bow down in awe and fear. They'll tremble as their very hearts are seized with regret for ever opposing you or No. 6. They will be like neutered dogs. No matter how badly they are treated, they will never be able to bite back. Fennec, it is not too late. Mobilize the army again, and clear away the mob that is milling in the square. It may even be wise to use the shockwave cannon, depending on the situation and the course of events. You've already completed on-site testing in the West Block, have you not?"

"That's almost like—" the mayor swallowed. "That's almost like a reign of terror."

"Reign of terror? Absurd. I have told you before: you are the ruler of No. 6. Its King. You reign over this country. You embody justice itself and all its forms. Opposing you is the same as defiling justice. It is only normal to use force to make them comply."

"...Stop it," the mayor said weakly.

"Fennec, what are you afraid of? This is not like you. You have always acted like the King that you are. You are conscious of your position as the chosen one, and you have always lived under that notion."

"I have." The mayor slumped his shoulders, and dropped his gaze to his feet. "I am the mayor. In No. 6's highest position of responsibility, highest position of power. It's only natural. We were the ones that built No. 6. We launched the revival project, and brought salvation to the dying land and its people. We built a utopian city, the most idyllic—most idyllic city possible by humankind."

"Precisely. You and I were both central members. In fact, only the two of us truly understood the ideals that No. 6 strove for. The other members were highly qualified, yes, but they lacked creativity. Or you might say they severely lacked ambition, or an ability to observe the changing times. But fortunately for us, we had those abilities, almost in excess. That is why we have come this far."

"This far?" the mayor said sarcastically. "You mean being surrounded and condemned by our citizens? Was our creativity and ambition and skill all for *this*?"

"This is only a temporary situation. It will conclude instantly if only you would take effective measures."

"Effective measures? I've taken several."

"And those are?"

"There are people fanning the flames of this chaos. I've ordered the Security Bureau to catch them as quickly as they can."

"Any ideas as to their location?"

"Not yet. They've gone underground."

"A clearly faulty plan. You should have obliterated all such dissidents beforehand. You ought to have destroyed them to their very roots. And what else have you done?"

"I used all sorts of mass media to broadcast my speech. I called on the citizens to remain calm, not to panic easily or be influenced by false rumours. I announced a state of emergency and put a lockdown order in effect. I commanded people to stay inside until the order was lifted, and announced that anyone deemed as a dissident would be arrested and detained, regardless of whether he or she is a Chronos resident. I listened to your warning, and I... mobilized the army."

"Hm. Well, no big mistakes so far. This would have been resolved much more quickly if you had used the army properly. But, well, small errors can be remedied. Everything will go smoothly."

The mayor bent over and scrutinized the sitting man.

"Go smoothly? How? What part of this is going smoothly for you? The citizens aren't retreating at all; in fact, they're out of control. No matter how much the soldiers try to suppress them, it doesn't work. Do you know why? Because casualty after casualty keeps occurring. Citizens are still dying, one after another, for a reason no one can understand. Everyone thinks that a new type of plague has suddenly broken out in the city. They think we're hiding the vaccine somewhere. It's absurd, absolutely absurd! That thing is no plague. It's because of *them*. Why are they going around killing citizens as they please? Why? I thought they were supposed to act however we wanted them to. I thought we had absolute rule over them!"

The wan smile vanished from the man's face. The corner of his mouth twitched ever so slightly.

"Fennec, how many times will you make me repeat myself? Yes, true, this was an unexpected happening. A random, totally unpredictable event. I acknowledge that. I acknowledge too, of course, that my predictions were much too optimistic. But this is not as dreadful as you make it out to be. It is nothing more than a precursor—a precursor to Its awakening."

"You're saying this chaos is just a precursor?"

"Why, yes. It is a mere response to Its awakening. Which gives you an idea of the enormous amount of energy this thing holds. Once It awakens completely and comes under our control, we will be able to harness that energy, and this chaos will calm."

"Are you... really sure?"

"Have I ever lied or given you false information? I have always told the truth. Fennec, you haven't forgotten, have you? I was the first to see your true potential to blossom as a politician instead of a researcher."

"—I remember. You pushed for me to enter as a candidate for No. 6's first mayor."

"Yes. You won that election, and you have reigned over No. 6 to this day. And you will continue to. There is no need for an election. There will be no need for the citizens to choose you of their own will. Fennec, don't waver now. You have to act at all times like the mighty man you are."

"A mighty man... is that what I wanted to become?"

"What did you say?" the man said sharply.

"I certainly did want to create a utopia with our very own hands," the mayor said pensively, "and I wasn't the only one. Back then, anyone who was involved in the building of No. 6 should have felt the same. We all spoke about how we would realize a utopian city here, embodying the dreams of humankind. We talked about how we would be the ones to build its foundations. Not a single person... hoped to become an exalted man."

"A utopia cannot exist unless there is one to wield absolute power and lead his people behind him. You should know this the best. Yes, the ones with overwhelming power are the ones who draw the majority along with them. If it weren't for that, No. 6 would not be called the utopia, the Holy City that it is called today. It is a victory on the part of your power and our ideology."

"Victory, you say."

"A complete victory," the man affirmed. "Some bumps along the way cannot be helped. Once we overcome those, No. 6 will continue to engrave its glorious history in time."

The mayor did not answer him. He clasped his hands behind his back, and resumed walking.

"When will It awaken?"

"Soon."

"Soon? It isn't like you to be so vague. Be specific."

The man shrugged. *Well, well. So he tells me to be specific. He must be getting impatient. People tend to want specific numbers the more they feel they are being cornered.*

"Let me see... within twenty-four hours. All will be settled and finished at this time tomorrow. Everything will be quiet and in its right place."

"Twenty-four hours... I can't wait that long. Within twenty hours, at least... no, twelve hours is the time limit."

"Impatient, are we, Fennec?"

"Impatient?" the mayor said incredulously. "How in the world could I be otherwise in this situation? The city hall—the Moondrop—is being hemmed in by citizens!"

The mayor's fist pounded the mahogany desk. The man shrugged one shoulder slightly.

"Fennec, surely you don't think the Moondrop is still the heart of No. 6?"

The mayor froze.

"What? What did you just say?"

"No. 6's most important function now lies in the Correctional Facility. The Moondrop has been reduced to a mere administrative body. It can be surrounded by anything, for that matter, and nothing serious would come of it. As long as we have the Correctional Facility, our No. 6 is in safe hands."

The colour receded from the mayor's face. The tip of his tongue twitched in his half-open mouth.

"What do you mean by that?"

"Mean? I just told you. The Correctional Facility is the heart and brain of No. 6."

"What..." the mayor croaked. His voice was overlapped by an electronic chime. A man's long thin face appeared on the television screen embedded in the wall. He was one of the secretaries under the mayor's direct order.

"Mayor, there are fires happening throughout the city."

"So the rioters have found their way in to set them."

"That's one thing, but there's more. The emergency systems in all the buildings are not functioning at all. In some buildings, I've heard that the core computer itself has caught fire and exploded."

The man was rendered speechless. There was only the sound of his wheezing breath whirling in his throat. *What is this footage?* The man let his throat rasp even more. *Some kind of trick? A scene from some cheap drama, what? What is he showing me this for?*

"The Correctional Facility is about to crumble!" The secretary's high-pitched yell tore into him. The man, unable to endure it, took two, three steps back.

"Wait, what's that shadow?" The mayor pushed the stumbling man back upright again, and brought his face close to the screen.

"What is that?"

The man looked as well. It was a black shadow looming up clearly against the flames.

"This... isn't this a wasp? No, but... wasps like this don't exist. They simply don't." The mayor's jaw trembled.

The man's chin was also trembling. The tremor raced through his entire body.

"Elyurias." The name slipped from his trembling lips. The mayor turned around.

"Did you say Elyurias?"

"Yes. It is Elyurias. But, no—she is supposed to be more beautiful, more demure. She is not supposed to be this—this enormous. She was supposed to be controllable to my every whim."

*Supposed to be. Supposed to be. Supposed to be. Supposed to be.*

The screen turned black as the video was cut off.

"Mayor, the citizens have gotten inside the Moondrop. Please, be careful!" the secretary continued to yell from the other screen.

"This cannot be!" the man and mayor's voices overlapped.

### CHAPTER 3

## This quintessence of dust

What a piece of work is a man, how noble in reason, how infinite in faculties, in form and moving how express and admirable, in action how like an angel, in apprehension how like a god – the beauty of the world, the paragon of animals! And yet, to me, what is this quintessence of dust? Man delights not me . . .<sup>3</sup>

-Shakespeare, *Hamlet* Act II Scene II

The doctor was much older than how Shion remembered him. The tall, liberal man used to come to Karan's shop once or twice a week to buy a sandwich or meat pie. A handsome beard and moustache adorned his face, and he spoke in a beautiful, clear baritone.

He had also once invited Shion to specialize in medicine and work at his clinic.

"You'd have no problem picking up the necessary specialized knowledge and technique. I recommend taking the certification exam if you're interested."

It was an attractive offer, but Shion did not take it up. There was no way someone like him, who had been stripped of all his privileges and exiled from Chronos, would be able to pass the exam. But Shion was happy that the doctor had looked out for him—a stranger and a mere baker's son—and offered him a path in medicine. He was also grateful.

In the months that Shion had not seen him, the doctor had transformed so much he hardly looked like the same person. There were white streaks in his beard and his hair, and he looked like he had shrunk a size. But in terms of appearance, Shion admitted he had probably undergone a more drastic change. There was his white hair, for one, and his face was smeared with blood, dirt, and soot.

The small clinic in the outskirts of Lost Town was run by the doctor, a nurse, and a nursing robot. The nurse screamed as the bloodied, dirty group burst in. Shion yelled over her shriek.

"Doctor, please—please, he needs treatment!"

"You... could you be—"

"The baker's son. Doctor, please. Treat him."

The doctor's eyes shifted to Nezumi. His gaze trained on the blood that dripped from him.

"Prepare for an emergency operation."

The nurse sprang into action even before the doctor finished speaking. She hastily disappeared into a room adjacent to the examination room. A robot came pushing a stretcher.

"Please place the patient here."

Shion laid Nezumi down on the stretcher.

"Nezumi," he called tentatively. His eyelids remained tightly closed. "Nezumi..."

"Please remove your arm. Please remove your arm from under the patient. Now transporting the patient to the operating room."

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3 Shakespeare, William. *Hamlet*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003. 75.

The robot urged him, but Shion's arms were stiff and unyielding, still holding Nezumi as he had all this time. Only his fingertips shook violently.

"Shion!" Inukashi grabbed his arms and yanked them for him.

"Now transporting the patient. Now transporting the patient. Entering emergency operating mode. Commencing oxygen intake. Commencing measurements. Now measuring blood pressure, pulse, heart rate, blood type."

The doctor swiftly cut Nezumi's clothes away. Several pipes grew from the robot's torso and connected to him.

"Transporting the patient. Transporting the patient." The stretcher and robot entered the operating room.

"Doctor." Shion grasped at the doctor's white coat. "Doctor, please... save him. Please..."

"Shion."

He did not expect to be called by his name. Shion lifted his face.

"I'm a doctor," the man said firmly. "If someone is in need of treatment, I will do everything in my power to give it to him. But this is Lost Town. I don't have the equipment it takes to perform delicate surgery."

Shion knew. But as he had told Rikiga, he had no choice but to rely on this doctor.

"I see that he's already gotten temporary treatment. Was that you?"

"Yes."

"What kind of wound is it?"

"A gunshot. A rifle bullet pierced him."

"Pierced, you say," the doctor muttered as he strode briskly into the operating room. Shion bowed his head deeply to the man's retreating back.

He felt faint. He sank to the floor.

"Shion..." Inukashi sat beside him, and put an arm around his shoulders. "Shion... I just want to ask you, do you... do you, by any chance, want me to be with you?"

"Inukashi..."

"Listen," Inukashi said brusquely, "I've never comforted anyone before. I used to think it wasn't worth a crumb of bread. Still think so. But... but if you want me to comfort you right now... if I can comfort you somehow by being here, then... then, I'll be here."

Inukashi gently rubbed Shion's arm. The tension gradually loosened, and blood began to course through his veins again. Shion closed his eyes, and let his head droop onto Inukashi's chest.

He felt an almost imperceptible soft bump. If this was the usual case, he would jump up in a confused panic. But right now, he only felt soothed. Right here, there was a body to support him, arms to hold him, a voice to murmur to him, and the warmth of another to comfort him. This was happiness that could not command a price. Was it not?

"Inukashi... thank you."

*Oh, but... Shion bit his lip with his eyes still closed. But this is not the warmth I long for. Not this body, these whispers, nor these arms.*

Something warm flitted over his eyelids. Inukashi had licked them. Inukashi was gently licking off the blood that had dried and caked on them. The little mice were curled up in Shion's lap, and the dogs had lain down in a corner of the room.

"It'll be alright," Inukashi said. "There's no way he'd die. He's not wuss enough to give in

just yet. I've seen my share of bad people in the West Block, but no one was as cunning, conniving, and dangerous as Nezumi. I told ya before, didn't I, that the guy is the devil himself. You just don't know his true face. And I'm still right. He's still the devil he always was, and devils aren't done in so easily. Tomorrow, he'll wake up as if nothing happened, and go right back to setting traps for us. He's that kind of guy. He'll be alright, don't worry."

Shion opened his eyes, and lifted himself up.

"Inukashi, I'm grateful. Thank you so much."

"I was only insulting Nezumi, dumbass. What're you feeling grateful about? You're a hopeless idiot, you know. Hopeless."

Inukashi turned aside obstinately. But he did not move away from Shion.

*Ungh, nghoaaaaar, nghoaaaaar.*

A snore rang out, making the very air of the room vibrate.

"Whoa! Will ya listen to that racket."

*Nghoaaaaar, nghoaaaaar, nghoaaaaar, ungh, ungh.*

Rikiga was fast asleep, lying on his back on a bench.

"Just now he was saying he wouldn't be able to sleep without some drinks in him, and now look at the guy. Like a log. I'm surrounded by hopeless people." Inukashi sighed theatrically. Then, he gave a short whistle. The dogs got to their feet and approached. They nestled close to Inukashi and Shion, and lay crouched on their bellies.

"These guys can make the best sleeping quarters out of any hole. It's time for us to catch a wink, too."

"Yeah..."

"We need to sleep, Shion." Inukashi pulled at Shion's shirt. "We won't be able to fight tomorrow if we don't. You don't think our fight is over yet, do you?"

He did not. Nothing had been solved yet. The fight would still continue tomorrow. *But if I lost Nezumi, if I had to face a tomorrow without him, then I wouldn't be able to remain a soldier.*

*You're weak. Unbelievably frail, he could hear Nezumi say in derision. Laugh at me, Nezumi. Look on me with contempt. Make fun of me. Give me a scornful laugh, a cold laugh. I just want to hear your laughter. Let me hear it, please.*

"Sleep," Inukashi said, almost like an order.

The Correctional Facility was burning. The flames roared up around it as it crumbled. *This is a dream, his reason told him. You've escaped the Correctional Facility. You're already in Lost Town, No. 6. That's why—this must be a dream.*

*This is an illusion.*

The flames roared. They were revoltingly real. He could clearly see the tip of each writhing flame. His skin smarted at the scorching air that blew at him. The acrid smell stung his nose.

*This is a dream? This is an illusion? Absurd. This is unmistakably reality.*

*But does that mean I've come back again? Have I slipped back in time to right after I escaped the Correctional Facility?*

The flames burned with even greater vigour. They roared, wavered, and overlapped. He saw them stretch out into thin strips before a black streak slashed through it.

Shion stood stock-still with his breath held. All confusion, agitation, and astonishment fell away. He simply stood in a trance.

The black streak kept widening. The flames split into two.

"A wasp..."

The rest failed to materialize as words.

It had a coal-black body, a slender curved torso, a long belly, transparent wings embroidered with thin golden lines; golden antennae and compound eyes; three simple eyes that shone a dull silver.

A giant wasp appeared out of the flames. It was a wasp, coloured coal-black, gold, and silver—light and darkness. Shion took a step backwards. Its beauty was almost terrifying. He was so overwhelmed, he was almost brought to his knees.

*What... is this?*

"Elyurias," a mutter touched his earlobe.

"Nezumi."

Nezumi was standing right beside Shion. He stared unblinking at the flames. No—he was not looking at the flames engulfing the Correctional Facility, but at the enormous wasp. Nezumi was holding his ground against it.

"Elyurias? This wasp?"

Nezumi did not answer. He did not stir. He was almost like a statue. For an instant, the wasp in front of Shion faded in his consciousness. Nezumi was standing there. His eyes were open wide. His profile expressionless, but blood coursed through that face.

"Nezumi, you really did—" *You really survived.*

Nezumi inhaled. His lips moved very slightly. A melody flowed forth. Gentle music found life as it left Nezumi's lips.

Shion smelled the lush scent of greenery. The sound of the rustling canopies reached his ears. He felt the beating of wings. The buzzing of small insects echoed in his eardrums, until even that melted into music, forming its ebb and flow.

His body was being lifted up. He no longer knew where he was. His body and soul were suspended in Nezumi's music. Shion let his whole body relax as he lent himself fully to it.

He could hear singing.

*The wind steals the soul away, humans thief the heart  
O earth, wind, and rain; O heavens, O light  
Keep everything here  
Keep everything here, and  
Live in this place  
O soul, my heart, O love, my feelings true  
Return home here  
And stay*

Nezumi was singing. Shion's heart was stolen away not by humans, but by this song, this voice. His heart came undone.



*The wind steals the soul away, humans thief the heart  
 But here I will stay  
 to keep singing  
 Please  
 Deliver my song  
 Please  
 Accept my song*

Shion had broken into a thin sheen of sweat in the midst of his ecstasy. A bead of sweat slid down his forehead.

Suddenly, he was blasted by hot air.

He was slammed to the ground. Charred pieces of debris grazed his cheeks, his body, as they bounced and tumbled across the ground.

"Don't get up." Nezumi's hand pressed on his back. "Keep lying low."

The wind kept blowing. Fragments of rock and debris rolled over the ground in front of Shion as he lay face-down on the ground.

*Chuckle chuckle chuckle.*

*Chuckle chuckle chuckle.*

Laughter welled up from deep underground. Or was it raining down from the heavens?

*Chuckle chuckle chuckle.*

*Chuckle chuckle chuckle.*

The wasp spread its wings wide open. The flames streamed sideways, crawling across the ground.

*Chuckle chuckle chuckle.*

*Chuckle chuckle chuckle.*

The wasp took flight. It ascended to the sky without a sound, leaving only the wind behind. A piercing buzz of wings rose all around. Thousands of small black specks took flight after the giant wasp. The swarm of them formed a wide band as they rose.

"Elyurias," Nezumi murmured again.

He couldn't breathe. There was something weighing down on his upper torso.

Shion awoke. Inukashi's head was on his chest. He was asleep with his ear pressed to Shion's chest as if to check his heartbeat. He was breathing softly. Two dogs were nestled close on either side of them.

*I see what he meant. You definitely wouldn't freeze to death like this.*

Another dog was curled up beside Rikiga. Despite his grumbling, Inukashi had also looked out for Rikiga to make sure he didn't freeze. Perhaps that explained why Rikiga's snores had turned into peaceful breathing.

They were in a small hospital room, Lost Town, No. 6. There was no mistake: time had not turned back. But that was not a dream. What he had seen was reality.

*Elyurias—was that it? A wasp born from a cocoon of flames?*

Shion gingerly touched the nape of his neck. He thought about the wasp that had tried to tear through that spot and crawl out of it. He thought about Yamase. He thought about the

thousands of wasps which had taken flight in a dense black stream. If those were all parasitic, what would become of No. 6?

He did not know.

He slipped a couch cushion under Inukashi's head, and stood up stealthily so as not to wake him. He had probably only been asleep for a short while—not more than thirty minutes. But his body felt surprisingly light. Was it because he was relieved?

*Nezumi survived.* He was certain. His heart, which was fraught with tension until then, gradually began to unwind. Shion took several deep breaths.

He was concerned about where the wasps were going, as well as what kind of fate awaited No. 6. But his relief at not losing Nezumi trumped it all.

He inhaled once more, deeply, and exhaled.

A computer was embedded in the doctor's desk. He pressed a button, and the screen silently began to load. He dug into the pocket of his sweater.

"There it is." The chip had been given to him by the man called Rou. He wondered what was going to happen to that underground area now that the Correctional Facility had crumbled. What had happened to Sasori? Or the boy who had handed him a bowl of water? The girl who had stared at Shion in wonder? And Safu?

Rou had said that the chip contained the entirety of his research, and that he entrusted it to Shion.

"After you have saved your friend, please try to decode it." His voice had been hoarse and feeble. *After you have saved your friend...*

*Safu. I couldn't save her.* She had been his precious friend, and he had abandoned her.

His last glimpse of Safu had been of her smiling. She looked a little more mature than Shion remembered, and she was beautiful.

*I couldn't save her. In the end, I couldn't save her.*

He made a fist and struck his chest. *I've made another wound here. A wound that'll ache for the rest of my life. I'll never forget. I won't be able to forget.*

*Safu. You're forever out of reach, no matter how strongly I feel for you. But you'll still be in my heart. I'll continue to think of you, and of what you left behind for me.*

He inserted the chip. He was not asked for a password. Shion bent forward and stared intently at the screen.

Everything to do with No. 6 during their underground conversation with Rou was written here. Elyurias, the Mao Massacre, the Forest People, destruction, predation and parasitism....

As he read on, wading through the mix of unintelligible technical language and numbers, he felt his fingertips growing colder.

Shion finished reading, and extracted the chip. His mind was half-numb and in a daze.

*So this was No. 6.*

*This was Elyurias.*

The door of the operating room opened and the doctor walked out.

"Doctor." Shion stood up, and the man nodded at him.

"He'll be alright. He's hanging in there."

"Thank you so much, doctor. Thank you."

The doctor removed his mask and grinned.

"You mentioned that you were the one who stemmed his bleeding and gave him temporary treatment?"

"Yes."

"You did a very nice job. He was also lucky that the bullet hadn't remained in his body. It pierced him, but thankfully it just missed the fatal spot. He's very fortunate, indeed."

"I told ya so."

Shion had not noticed Inukashi standing behind him. Inukashi had a hand on his hip, and shot a quick glance at Shion.

"Nezumi has a notorious amount of good luck when it comes to getting out of bad situations. You don't need to worry about him."

"And I think I need to worry about the rest of you," the doctor smiled crookedly. "Where were you hit, Shion?"

"You know my name?"

"I do. It did make the headlines when you got arrested and taken to the Correctional Facility."

"I see..."

"Everyone who had any knowledge of you was surprised. I don't think anyone could believe that you were the 'fallen elite turned murdering monster' or the workplace murder suspect that the authorities made you out to be."

"You too, doctor?"

"You could say that. I was more pained than surprised. I'd caught on that the authorities were trying to paint a false picture of you as a criminal."

The doctor then let out a long breath.

"It was the same with my younger brother," he said.

"Your brother?"

"Yes. We were far apart in age. Our father passed away early on, so I raised him like a son. He was abducted by the Security Bureau five years ago, when he was eighteen. Take a guess at why."

"Because he refused to declare his loyalty to No. 6?"

"Absolutely right. My brother refused to partake in the allegiance ritual held at their school every morning. He didn't like being forced to submit. I think it came from his youthful pride and sense of justice. And as a human, it was normal for him to feel this way. My brother was indeed a proper, normal adolescent. Maybe he was a little more rebellious and stubborn than most. He was also a little inexperienced in the ways of the world. My brother was summoned to the Moondrop the same day, and he didn't come back until two weeks later."

"He came back?"

"He came back, but he was transformed. I don't mean dead—he was alive. But he may as well have been dead. You could see no remnant of the cheerful, active captain of the basketball team that he used to be. He hardly spoke or responded to me, and just gazed blankly at the sky all day, just vacantly stared.... He killed himself not long after coming home. I can't even bear to think about what he must have gone through during those two weeks. I said he killed himself, but in truth, he was murdered by this city. Our mother collapsed from shock, and she never..."

she passed away not more than three days later. Her will to live was torn from her once she saw what her beloved son was reduced to. Our mother may as well have been murdered, too. No, she I believe was. It was definitely murder." The doctor nodded vehemently as if to convince himself.

*He killed himself.*

Shion recalled the doctor's words in his head again.

In the idyllic city of No. 6, cases of suicide were infinitely close to zero. All citizens were promised blissful and peaceful lives. But what an empty, artificial promise it was.

The doctor bit his lip as if to endure a throbbing pain. This man had also suffered at the hands of No. 6. Already how many lives had the city devoured?

Shion clenched his hand into a tight fist.

No. 6 did not permit people to be people, nor for each to be his own.

*Why?* he almost screamed. *Rou said so. He said he tried to construct a utopia—one without war, discrimination, or unhappiness.*

*When did it go wrong? What went wrong to transform it into such a ruthless monster? What went wrong—?*

The doctor's face unravelled into a smile as his lips relaxed.

"But Karan was fearless. She continued to open her shop, bake bread, and put it on the shelves. Every time I passed Karan's bakery, I couldn't help but breathe in the delicious aroma of freshly-baked bread. She is amazing for carrying on her daily work in spite of her loss. She probably strongly believed that you were going to come home. I felt pity for Karan, you know. I thought there was a slim chance, if there was even one, that you were coming home. I believed if you did come back, you would be just like my brother. But you did come back, and in one piece. You came back proper."

"I did change in appearance, though."

"Appearances don't matter, as long as your soul isn't broken. That's precisely No. 6's plan—to govern human souls. To rule the hearts, minds, and even thoughts of people."

Inukashi stifled a huge yawn.

"So tell me what else is new. I thought this was obvious to you guys already. For us West Block residents, No. 6 ain't no utopia. It's like a bloated, fat vampire."

"A vampire... I can see that." A smile spread across the doctor's face. "And that vampire is writhing in pain from the changes occurring in its body. To think—to think this day has come—ha ha ha! I wish I could have shown this to my brother and mother! Ha ha ha ha!"

The doctor's laughter gradually gained momentum until it became a roar. Inukashi furrowed his brow and recoiled.

"Hey, Shion. Is the doc okay? I mean, up here?" He pointed at his head. "You sure he hasn't got something loose in there?"

"He saved Nezumi's life," Shion said sternly.

"Sure didn't do anything for me," retorted Inukashi.

The doctor was still laughing. Shion slowly enunciated his words as he spoke at the man's trembling back.

"Doctor, can I see Nezumi?"

The laughter stopped. The doctor turned around. The echoes of his laughter and the residue of his mirth still swam in his eyes.

"Nezumi? Ah, you mean that boy. What a peculiar name. Not his real name, is it?"

"I don't think so."

"And what is?"

He had opened his mouth to say "I don't know" when the door to the examination room opened a crack. A tall, thin man was edging his upper body into view. A crow was perched on his shoulder. The mice gave a terrified screech. One dove into Shion's pocket, while the other two squeezed under the belly of a dog with patched fur.

"Yoming, what's the matter?" The doctor strode over to the man. Yoming whispered something into his ear. The doctor's eyebrows rose dramatically.

"The Correctional Facility!" The doctor's mouth gaped open. "The Correctional Facility—is that even possible?"

Yoming answered him. Shion could not catch it. He didn't want to. Right now, he was in no mood to listen.

*I want to see Nezumi.* All of his thoughts concentrated into that one point. His heart pounded in anticipation.

*I want see him and know that he's alive.*

Shion put his hand on the operating room door.

"He's upstairs." The doctor pointed an index finger straight up at the ceiling. "There's a recovery room on the second floor. Aria is attending to him. There's a direct-route elevator in the operating room, too, but I want you to use the stairs in the hallway."

"Thank you, doctor."

"Oh—wait a minute," the doctor said. "Don't tell me you've come from the Correctional Facility—"

Shion did not hear the last of the doctor's sentence. He tore into the hallway.

"Hey, wake up, old man! Looks like we're paying Nezumi a visit. We need to get some flowers."

"Nnngh, what? Who said I ever wanted to go?"

"Quit talking in your sleep and wake the hell up."

Shion left Inukashi and Rikiga bickering behind him, and dashed up the stairs. His legs faltered for a moment as he reached the corridor, dimly lit by nighttime lights.

It reminded him of the long, straight corridor of the Correctional Facility. But this atmosphere was not impregnated with fear; it did not prick his skin as before.

He exhaled softly.

Only one room by the stairs had the lights on. Shion regulated his breathing, and gently placed his hand on the door. It slid silently open.

The room walls were painted a pale yellow. Across from him, darker yellow curtains were drawn across what he supposed was a large window.

By the window, the nursing robot was making faint electronic sounds by the bed. When Shion entered, it raised its arm as if to reject him.

"Resting. Resting. Not taking visitors. The patient is resting. Not taking visitors."

*I see, this robot must be Aria.* He bent low to talk to the robot.

"Aria, thank you. I'm very grateful."

"Grateful. Grateful. Grateful." The nursing robot's visual sensors flashed, and turned from red to green. It seemed to have acknowledged Shion's presence.

"Aria, I want you to let me see your patient. I want to see him really badly. I'll do anything."

Aria's visual sensors stopped flashing—or rather, she stopped blinking. Her green eyes were fixed on Shion.

"Want to see. Want to see. Request accepted. Request accepted."

Aria glided across the floor. She retracted her arm, and settled herself in a corner of the room. She looked like a quirky but lovable piece of interior decor. The dogs lay around her peacefully.

Nezumi was sleeping on the bed. He was connected to many tubes, and his eyes were closed. A tinge of colour had returned to his cheeks, perhaps thanks to a blood transfusion. His superfibre cloth was folded neatly and placed beside the bed, no doubt by Aria.

Shion bent over Nezumi and took his pulse. It was faint, but regular. Shion could definitely feel it. A sigh of relief escaped his lips.

"Nezumi..." He felt his body unravel as he released a sigh.

*He made it. He survived.* Shion knelt by the bed and buried his face in the sheets. He could feel Nezumi's heartbeat. He wanted to raise his voice and cry—as loudly as his voice would allow.

*He's alive. He's alive. Nezumi's alive.*

"I could do with a few more winks." Rikiga yawned, showing a full array of teeth.

"I'm hungry," Inukashi said. "And my dogs are hungry, too. It's all good that Nezumi made it, but it ain't gonna be funny if we die from starvation instead. Ah damnit, I'm starved!"

"If 'we' die? Don't lump me in with the likes of you."

"You've got nothing to do with it, old man. I'm talking about me and my dogs. Hey, robot, uh—Aria, was it? Struck lucky with a pretty name, haven't ya? Doesn't suit you at all. So, Ms. Aria, can you get us some grub or what?"

"Grub. Grub. Grub. Cannot comprehend. Cannot comprehend."

"I mean a meal. Patients and injured people still need to eat, right?" Inukashi made a motion of wolfing something down.

"Meal. Understood. Understood."

Aria's torso opened up. A row of three steaming paper cups appeared. Inukashi whistled, and Rikiga swallowed hungrily.

"Two more, two more," Inukashi said. "For my dogs. And some bread and meat, if you've got any."

"No meat. Have bread." Her torso opened again. Two more paper cups and some rolls appeared.

"You're the best. I think I might fall in love with you. I'd give you a huge kiss."

"I wouldn't do that," Rikiga said. "Think of the poor robot who has to get a kiss from you. It would probably stop functioning. Don't turn such a good girl into a lump of scrap metal. Hm? What's this?"

Rikiga furrowed his brow as he brought the cup away from his lips.

"It's bland. It may as well be hot water. And this bread... it doesn't taste like anything."

"It's hospital food, don't complain about it. Look how easy it was to get hot soup and bread. Can't beat No. 6. In the West Block, you could only dream of a feast like this. Right, Shion?"

"Yeah. It's really tasty." He was not simply going along with Inukashi. He really found it delicious.

This taste almost matched that of the rich soup that Nezumi made on the day he had escaped to the West Block—the day he had miraculously lived through the wasp's attack.

It soaked into his body, quenched his soul, and revived him. Just one cup of soup restored his confidence that he would live through another day.

*It's delicious.*

*Nezumi, wake up. Wake up so you can sip this cup of soup. Look at me again with those eyes full of life.*

"Mm..." Nezumi shifted. The whiteness of the bandage around his shoulder and chest stung Shion's eyes.

"Nezumi, Nezumi!" Shion called to him. He poured his soul into the name he had called so many times before. Nezumi's eyelashes fluttered ever so slightly.

"He's probably still knocked out from the anaesthesia," Rikiga said. "He won't be waking up for a while. Hmm, but even a devil like him looks like an angel when he's all quiet and asleep like this. Strange, isn't it?" he murmured pensively.

"Hah, you still hung up on him, old man? How many times have you been shafted because you were fooled by his looks?"

"I've been shafted enough times, with or without his good looks. By both Eve and you." Rikiga sighed. "Am I just going to spend the rest of my life being bossed around by rude, filthy brats? Just thinking about it makes me depressed. I need a drink to stomach this. Lady Aria, you don't happen to have some booze on you, do you?"

"Booze. Booze. Booze. Cannot comprehend. Unable to process your request."

"Alcohol. You know, I want something that'll hit me in the guts with some *oomph*."

"We have: alcohol antiseptic. We have: disinfectant alcohol. We have: sterilization alcohol. Which one do you need? Which one do you need?"

"I don't need any of that. I don't need antiseptics, nor do I need to be disinfected or sterilized. God, what a useless princess." Rikiga clicked his tongue.

Inukashi turned aside and laughed discreetly. Shion also couldn't help but twitch the corners of his mouth. Rikiga wore a wry smile. The three glanced at each other and laughed for some time.

"I never expected you'd make it back like this," Inukashi murmured thoughtfully after their laughter had died down.

"Me neither," Shion agreed.

"Not to mention that bonus work you guys did with the Correctional Facility. I have a bit of a new regard for you, to tell you the truth. I honestly never expected—had no clue how you'd pull it off. I thought you guys would never be able to escape through the garbage chute."

"It's thanks to you and Rikiga-san, Inukashi."

"Thanks to us, huh. Say, Shion..."

"Hm?"

"Didn't it ever cross your mind that we might not show up at the waste depot? What if we pulled a no-show, or we showed up but left early—you didn't think about that at all?"

Shion searched his soul for a moment at Inukashi's question. What had he thought back then? He searched, then gave an answer.

"I didn't think of it at all." He gazed into Inukashi's eyes. "That never even crossed my mind. I believed that you and Rikiga-san would be there. Nezumi must have thought so, too. I'm sure he had solid belief in you."

"Well, that's all great and nice for you, but let me say that we... well, I dunno about the old man, but... I don't owe nothing to you guys. I didn't have an obligation to wait in there."

"Me neither," Rikiga chimed in. "I might have my share of grudges, but I don't have any obligation or debts to owe, either." He clucked his tongue repeatedly.

"Lemme tell you something, Shion," Inukashi stabbed a sharp-clawed index finger in Shion's direction. "Don't think I got myself involved in this hell of a mess for free. You guys owe me now. You best be prepared, 'cause I'm putting hefty interest on it."

"I'll have you know that I'm going to be sending out an invoice addressed to Eve as well. He's made me spend quite a bit of money, taking everything into account. I wouldn't be able to rest in peace if I didn't get reimbursed for that at least."

Inukashi and Rikiga grimaced at the same time as if they had rehearsed it. Shion suppressed a laugh and nodded solemnly. He didn't care how astronomical the interest rate was, or how exorbitant the invoice was. The two had stayed and waited for them. In that hygiene management room, where life and death jostled each other, they had continued to wait, believing that Shion and Nezumi would return alive.

He bit his lip.

Safu had also been waiting. She had been waiting for Shion. She was probably waiting for him, not to say goodbye, but to escape together with him.

*I couldn't hold up my end.*

He had not been able to give her what Rikiga and Inukashi had given him.

"Hey, Shion." Inukashi hugged his knees and leaned closer. "Whaddaya think is gonna happen to the West Block?"

"The West Block, huh..."

"Yeah. No. 6 is spiralling into chaos, by the looks of it. The Correctional Facility is gone. The gates are blown apart. Maybe that wall—the wall that separates the West Block and No. 6—maybe that'll break down too. Ya think?"

"Yeah. In fact, it most likely will."

Inukashi swallowed, and curled up just slightly.

"So, if that happens, I wonder what everyone in the West Block is gonna do. How would they face people who've treated them like crap all this time? Would they take their anger out on them? Would they storm into No. 6? Would they fight, or run away... wonder what they'll do? When I think about it, I just... well, it makes my head spin."

"Mm-hmm..." Inukashi was right. It made his head spin, too. A world without walls: it was beyond his imagination. What would hold ground there? Surely not just peace and open



freedom. How would the West Block's wind, swirling with hatred and anguish, blow against No. 6?

It simply exceeded his imagination.

"Turn the lights out," said a low, cutting voice.

"Wh—Eve, are you—?" Rikiga fell speechless.

Nezumi was sitting upright. His dark grey eyes glinted sharply. "Turn off the lights. Quickly," he repeated.

Inukashi's nose twitched. He jumped to his feet, and pressed the electric switch. All the lights were cut, and darkness fell over Shion's vision like a veil.

"Nezumi, what—"

"Shh!"

Nezumi moved in the darkness. He pulled out all the tubes that were inserted into his arm. He slipped to the floor and knelt down.

"Keep quiet. Don't even move."

Inukashi shivered.

Time passed. One minute, two minutes, three minutes... suddenly, noise erupted from downstairs. Footsteps, shouting, screaming, then gunshots.

"Run! It's the Security Bureau!"

"Don't move. Move, and we will shoot."

"Run! Get out of here!"

"All you traitors are under arrest."

"Kill them, it's no big matter."

"Their leader is getting away! Get him, and kill him!"

Those were the few words that Shion's ears managed to catch.

He curled up in the darkness.

He curled up and sat still, feeling Nezumi's warmth and breathing right beside him.

## CHAPTER 4

### Out, out, brief candle

Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow  
 Creeps in this petty pace from day to day,  
 To the last syllable of recorded time,  
 And all our yesterdays have lighted fools  
 The way to dusty death. Out, out, brief candle.  
 Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player  
 That struts and frets his hour upon the stage . . .<sup>4</sup>  
 -Shakespeare, *Macbeth* Act V Scene V

Just once, he heard footsteps approach. Someone was trying to run up the stairs. But the footsteps died along with a gunshot, a scream, and someone tumbling down the stairs. He didn't have to see it to know what happened. The same stairs that Shion had flew up moments ago were probably spattered with someone's blood.

Not only the stairs. The floor, the entrance, and the consultation room were probably smeared with blood and littered with broken objects in a horrific scene. A body or two probably lay on the floor.

*What about the doctor?* What had become of the man who saved Nezumi's life?

"Don't move." Nezumi restrained his arm. "Don't move yet."

Shion, Inukashi, and Rikiga all held their breaths and tensed as if they were bound by his words. Even the dogs lay low to the floor, unmoving like boulders, save to growl softly at the footsteps.

One minute, two minutes, three minutes....

"Freedom for No. 6! Freedom for all of us!" A hoarse, high-pitched scream resounded, its gender indiscernible. Right afterwards, angry voices and the sound of fierce beatings were heard through the window.

*It's the same.* Shion made a fist. His palm was damp with perspiration.

It was the same—no different from the Hunt in the West Block. The brutality he had seen under the thick snow clouds was taking place again right here.

Stealthily within the walls, openly outside of them—that was the only difference.

The sweat stung the countless cuts on his palm and made it throb slightly. Sweat streamed down his cheek, and entered his mouth.

In No. 6, he used to feel trapped and suffocated, like being forced to wear clothes that didn't quite fit. But until Nezumi had saved him and they had begun to live in the West Block, he had never had much difficulty dealing with these vague doubts and feelings of suffocation. Not until he was given a chance to look at No. 6 from the outside. In fact, he had taken comfort in No. 6's cleanliness and abundant lifestyle. It was true. He had been devouring this comfort and taking it for granted. Back then, the Security Bureau's existence hardly crossed his mind. It

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4 Shakespeare, William. *Macbeth*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005. 156.

never had to; the days still went by. On the surface, time passed peacefully without incidence.

When had it all begun?

Shion was wheeling his bike across the park after his shift. He was allowed to ride his bicycle in the park, as long as he didn't go over the speed limit. But the spring sunset was so beautiful that Shion had felt like taking a stroll to take it all in.

The sky was divided into dark pink, red, and carmine. The streaming clouds caught the sun, their edges glittering golden. The sweet fragrance of the flowers blended with the refreshing scent of new leaves, enveloping the passersby.

"Ah, the end of another day."

"It was wonderful, wasn't it?"

"All's right with the world, as they say. What do you say to topping it all off with a mouthwatering meal and some excellent wine?"

"Oh, how splendid. That sounds great."

He could hear the lighthearted conversation of a young man and woman—were they lovers, husband and wife, or good friends?

*They're right. It's a perfect evening to enjoy wine over a nice meal in the company of someone close,* Shion had thought, feeling a comfortable sort of weariness and hunger himself.

*All's right with the world.*

Neither Shion nor that man or woman had any clue about what lurked in the depths of that day. Most people didn't. It wasn't because of the dreamy spring evening. Through hot summer days, sleety mornings, in autumn sunsets, they had never noticed.

The majority of the citizens were neither concerned nor interested about the Security Bureau. They probably had no idea that it would bare its fangs so ferociously at the slightest voice of protest from the citizens. They thought of the Security Bureau as an organization that maintained and protected their safety—an organization for the people—were they not? And they believed in this clause—

*No. 6 exists for its citizens. It exists to ensure a plentiful and comfortable life for its citizens. No one shall be permitted to threaten the safety, activities, and lives of the citizens in any way whatsoever.*

They believed the city would also abide by this clause of its own City Charter. The people relied upon the city, left everything in its hands, and unwittingly allowed themselves to be pulled along by its flow.

And this was the result.

The sweat stung in his wounds. Nezumi's hand was still restraining Shion's arm.

*If this was the result, then Nezumi—where did we go wrong? Do you know the answer?*

*No—I'm the one that needs to know the answer, not you. I was born as a No. 6 citizen, reaped all of its benefits, and lived without any concern for the outside or inside. I'm the one who has to reach out and grasp the answer, in exchange for always choosing the comfort of lending myself to the least resistant path, rather than struggling against the current.*

*I know. Meeting you has taught me, and so have the words we exchanged and the days we spent together. I need an answer that I've grasped with my own hands, rather than one that's been prepared for me.*

*Mine, and not someone else's.*

*Or else I'll end up with the same result again.*

"They weren't after us, then." Shion sensed Inukashi twitching his nose in the dark. "I was totally under the impression that... the doctor tipped the Bureau off. Looks like that wasn't it."

"No, it definitely wasn't."

*Traitors.* That was what the Bureau officials had said. The target of their sting had not been Shion, but the others—the doctor, and Yoming.

Inukashi twitched his nose again. "Nezumi... aren't we safe now?"

"Wait. It's still too early."

"Tsk, paranoid as always."

One minute, two minutes, three minutes....

"Hey, Nezumi."

"Don't rush. But—alright, it should be fine now. Don't turn on the lights. Leave them off, and move quietly."

Nezumi pushed the door slightly ajar, and whistled softly. Hamlet poked his head out from Shion's pocket, alighted on the floor, and dashed through the open crack.

Momentarily, a lighthearted squeak greeted them.

*Cheep cheep, chit-chit-chit.*

*Cheep cheep, chit-chit-chit.*

"Alright, let's go downstairs. Avoid the elevator, just in case." Nezumi swiftly wrapped the superfibre cloth around himself, and slipped into the hallway.

"What the hell was that?" Shion saw Rikiga's mouth gaping open by the light that spilled in from the hallway. "Wasn't he unconscious just now? Or was that an act, too? Playing the part of a prince on his deathbed?"

Inukashi shrugged.

"He ain't no prince. He's an animal. Like a savage beast. No way he can sleep in the face of oncoming danger. He sensed the Security Bureau guys before my nose could sniff them out, damnit. Pisses me off."

"I see. Now I have a good idea of how Eve could have survived this far. With instincts as sharp as those, and that cautiousness to boot..."

"Falling in love all over again, old man?"

"I just confirmed my notion that he doesn't have an ounce of good in him."

The humans, dogs, and mice crept down the stairs cautiously, step by step. There was a pool of blood in the stairwell. At the bottom of the stairs was the owner of that blood, a man in his forties or fifties lying on his back.

The lower floor was just as grisly as Shion imagined. Blood had sprayed the walls and the floor. There was broken glass and furniture strewn about, all soiled with dirt and blood. At the end of the hall, a blue-grey door was half-open. The room was dark and the air inside cold—a basement room, perhaps.

A man lay slumped against the door, and the nurse at his feet. A figure clad in a lab coat lay a few metres away. The three of them were perfectly still.

"Doctor!" Shion ran to him and lifted him up in his arms. The chest of the man's lab coat

was dyed in blood. "Doctor, answer me, please."

His words felt painfully empty as they escaped his lips.

The doctor was clearly almost dead. There was no hope for him.

"Doctor, doctor! Open your eyes, please," Shion continued to implore with empty words. That was all he could do.

The door to the consulting room opened, and Aria appeared, evidently from the elevator.

"Vital signs: none. Vital signs: none. Vital signs—minimal. Minimal."

The doctor's eyelids slowly lifted.

"Vital signs: minimal. Commencing treatment."

Several tubes extended from Aria's torso, and connected to the doctor's body.

"Aria... don't. It's no use..."

"No use. No use... cannot comprehend. Continuing treatment."

"Doctor, what... why did this happen?"

"...He... broadcasting... from the basement of this clinic... calling... on his comrades to defeat No. 6 together..."

"Vital signs: minimal. Probability of recovery: one percent. One percent."

"I wanted revenge... on No. 6... revenge..."

"Doctor," Shion pleaded.

"I wanted to... destroy this world... and build it... anew."

Suddenly the doctor dug his fingers into Shion's arm.

"Shion," the man called his name in a clear, strong voice. "I leave this in your hands."

His eyes were open wide, fixed intently on Shion.

"I leave it... in your hands. Don't ever make... No. 6... this kind of city... again. Please. I'm leaving it to you."

The doctor's fingers slipped out of his own. The light went out of his eyes as they glazed over. His whole body convulsed.

Then, it was over.

"Vital signs: minimal. Minimal. Unable to register. Unable to register. Aborting treatment."

"Doctor..."

Shion laid the man down, and put a hand over his eyelids. With his eyes closed, the doctor looked peaceful and relaxed.

"Leave it to you, huh." Inukashi let out a long sigh. "You guys are the ones who built No. 6 in the first place," he said to the doctor's body. "But once something goes wrong and it spins out of control, you just shove it off onto someone else? Not exactly a friendly gift to leave to someone, is it? A little selfish, don't you think, doctor? I guess it's none of my business, though."

"Inukashi, what good is it to mouth off at a dead man? He's not going to hear any of it. Poor guy." Rikiga clasped his hands in front of his chest and bowed his head.

"The hell are you doing?" Inukashi asked.

"I'm praying to God, can't you tell? O God, please forgive this sinful man. May you bless his soul and let him rest in peace by your side."

"Hah, you don't even believe in God. What an act. Oh, wait—you must be praying to

God Moneybags Almighty, right, old man?"

"Rotten kid," spat Rikiga. "You never get tired of spewing insults, do you? Once this settles down, you're in for it. You remember that." Rikiga unclasped his hands and rolled his shoulder joints.

"So, what now?" he said. "We've accomplished our big goal of destroying the Correctional Facility. As for me, I'm in the mood for heading back to the West Block and crawling into bed. I feel like curling up and dreaming about digging up gold from underneath the Correctional Facility. I'd wake up to the best morning ever. It puts me in a good mood already."

"Old man, you can be sarcastic all you want, but Nezumi's not gonna respond. I'd get a better response out of complaining to that corpse over there." Inukashi chuckled spiritedly, his shoulders shaking with his laughter.

"But truth be told, I'm all for crawling into bed myself. And, well, there are a lot of things that I want to mull over. It doesn't help that it's kinda creepy being inside No. 6. It gives me a bad vibe, makes my skin crawl. Shion, don't you wanna go home, too? It's not too far from here, is it? Your mum must be waiting for you."

"Yeah..." Shion's house was within walking distance from here.

"Don't you wanna see your mum again?"

"Yeah, I do."

"Karan, huh. I'd like to see her too," Rikiga murmured wistfully.

*Mom, there's no telling how much I've probably made you worry. I want you to see that I'm doing well. I want you to see that I'm safe. I want to say sorry. I want to apologize from the bottom of my heart. Mom, I'm sorry.*

Shion was overwhelmed with nostalgia and love for his mother. He remembered the scent of freshly-baked bread. Yearning. Love. *I wish I could see you.*

But the only place he wanted to return to was that basement room littered with books. He wanted to go back to that room and its countless volumes, the bed, the stove, and the tattered chair.

*I want to go home.*

Shion burned with longing.

*I want to bring back those days, those moments I spent with Nezumi in that room. I would give up anything.*

But he would not return. Those days had long passed, never to come within his grasp again.

Ever.

It was a premonition—a premonition which he almost certainly believed would come true. Shion purposely averted his eyes from it. He knew well it was a sign of weakness, but he did it anyway.

Shion stood up and turned to face Nezumi.

"Can you move?"

"Somewhat."

Nezumi lifted himself up from where he was leaning on the wall, and let out a long breath. A thin sheen of sweat covered his forehead.

"Aria, can you measure his blood pressure, pulse, and body temperature? Based on that, tell me what an appropriate treatment for him would be."

"Understood. Understood. Blood pressure, pulse, body temperature, commencing measurements. Commencing measurements."

"No need." Nezumi shook his head in refusal. "It's a waste of time."

He brushed off Aria's extended pipes, and sighed again.

"M'lady, with all due respect, allow me to politely decline your offer. We don't have time for treatment."

Aria blinked, and her eyes turned yellow.

"Due respect, decline, time. Cannot comprehend. Cannot comprehend. Aborting measurements."

"Nezumi, you plan to go?"

"Of course."

Inukashi and Rikiga looked at each other.

"Go where?" Rikiga asked. Inukashi scowled in silence.

"To city hall," Shion answered.

"City hall? You mean the Moondrop?"

"Yes."

"Wh—do you know what state that place is in right now?" Rikiga exclaimed. "I mean, I don't know myself, but... it's sure to be chaos. The Security Bureau is cracking down on citizens left and right—shot some of them, even. They've probably gotten word of what happened to the Correctional Facility. The rest of the people will find out about it soon—No. 6 doesn't have the power to suppress the spread of information like it used to. The confusion is only going to get worse. It'll be completely out of control."

"That's why we're going." Nezumi smiled wanly. Nezumi had countless deft ways to smile. This one was a cold smile with a hint of mockery.

"It's our once-in-a-lifetime chance to see No. 6 perform its last dying shriek on stage. We better hurry, or we won't even get standing seats."

"With the state you're in?" Rikiga replied incredulously. "You can't do it, Eve. Sure, you might be stronger than you look, but you're human. You have limits. Don't do it. No. 6 will play its star role even if we're not in the audience. It'll pull off its role of the wretched, self-destructing giant with flying colours."

"You're telling me to throw away this chance and retreat with my tail between my legs?"

"Yes. You two destroyed the Correctional Facility, and that definitely helped trigger the demise of No. 6. That's amazing, and you've done enough. More than enough. Eve, Shion, don't go further than this. Back off and let nature take its course. It's time for you two to retreat backstage."

"Being backstage staff is not my style," Nezumi said. "Neither is throwing away a chance that's already in my hands."

"Your greed is bottomless," Rikiga said in disgust. "Listen to me, don't make me say this again. Your part is over. It's not worth it to risk your lives to stand onstage."

Shion stood in front of Rikiga and shook his head.

"Rikiga-san, we have to go. We have to go, no matter what."

"Shion, you too? Why? What for? You were able to escape the Correctional Facility, a

damn miracle it was. Why won't you retreat to where it's safe? Doesn't your life mean anything to you?"

"We're not going because we want to die," Shion said firmly. "We're going because he's the only one who can stop Elyurias."

"Elyurias?" Rikiga's eyes darted about. "What is that? Someone's name?"

"She's the queen who once ruled over this land. I don't know if 'queen' is the right name for her—she never tried to dominate her subjects or drain their wealth like humans do. She only protected the rules of the forest, and the workings of nature."

"Shion... what are you talking about?" Rikiga drew his chin back. A bead of sweat rolled along his jawline, across his five-o'clock shadow.

"Humans—the humans who attempted to build No. 6 on this land trampled Elyurias' land and tried to reign over everything within it. They burnt the forests, massacred the Forest People, and tried to build a world that was solely for themselves. Only their own abundance, their own wealth, their own safety and prosperity was their concern. They built a disconnected utopia on a foundation of others' sacrifices."

"Shion," Nezumi called. It was a quiet, beautiful voice. "You know everything?"

"No. What I know is probably only a small part. I only read what was in Rou's chip."

Nezumi sank to the floor. He curled up, and muttered, "I see."

"Hey, keep going," Rikiga said. "I still have no idea what you're talking about. Sounds like complete gibberish. So how is Elyuri-what's-her-face related to what's happening to No. 6? What do you mean when you say Eve is the only one who can stop her? Shion, give me the details."

"I'd love to hear all about it, too." Inukashi clicked his tongue lightly. His hands were full with numerous bags.

"What—where did you go? What is all that?"

"Clothes and food. Bland soup and bread just doesn't do it for me. And besides, if we're going to watch a play, I think we need to look a little more decent. They wouldn't even let us in the standing seats."

Inukashi dug out a chunk of meat and a roll from the bag, and tossed it at the dogs. The dogs promptly pounced without even raising their voices. The mice skilfully stopped a tumbling roll, and lined up to nibble at it.

"Good. Eat," Inukashi said proudly. "Eat as much as you want. You guys worked hard. You did a good job. This is your reward. Heh heh, that's the amazing thing about No. 6. Even a clinic in the middle of nowhere like this has a kitchen full of food. Not to mention expensive-looking clothes. Heh heh, heh heh heh heh, this place is full of top-notch items. I could get a good price for this in the West Block."

"You've come this far and you're still thieving?" Rikiga said.

"Who cares? The doctor is dead. Dead people don't need food or clothes."

"Well... I guess you're right. Hey, pass me some ham, bread, and those blue pants."

"I'll sell them to you for one silver piece."

"Inukashi, you bastard, you just said goodbye to your ride," Rikiga snarled. "You can walk back to the West Block."

"I was kidding, yeesh! Old man has no sense of humour. That's why all the women trick



you out of your money. Anyway, come on, let's eat. We gotta prepare for the road ahead."

Inukashi turned a bag upside down. Ham, apples and bread tumbled out.

"Let's have a banquet while we listen to the story Shion The Great has got to tell. Sounds like an interesting one."

Inukashi's eyes glittered from underneath his long bangs. His pink tongue flitted across his lips again and again.

"Maybe he'll tell us who Nezumi really is. This is bound to be interesting. In fact, I'm way more interested in this than a drama starring No. 6, to be honest."

Shion scooped up an apple.

"Nezumi, can you eat?"

"Ah, I haven't recovered to that point yet. I'm not hungry."

"I figured as much. Aria, can you give him some glucose solution?"

"Understood. Understood. Commencing glucose transfusion."

"I'd like a transfusion of wine," Rikiga chimed in.

"You'll have to settle with grape juice. There were two bottles in the fridge." Inukashi handed a bottle of reddish-purple liquid to Rikiga.

"Alright, Shion. We're all ready. Spit out everything you know." His pink tongue flitted across his lips again. Shion peered at Nezumi, apple still in hand.

"Nezumi... is it alright?"

Nezumi inclined his head very slightly. He propped his knees up, and put his face down on his arms. He looked like he was either crying, or bearing a wind that was blowing against him.

Shion took a bite of the apple. Its tart juice burst inside his mouth.

Inukashi and Rikiga leaned forward, Inukashi clutching a piece of bread and ham in each of his hands, and Rikiga gripping a bottle of grape juice.

The two had put their lives in the balance for Shion and Nezumi. They had acted on Shion and Nezumi's word with next to no knowledge of what they were doing. In other words, they had believed in the two boys. They had invested their lives into their belief. Telling them everything was the only way to match the leap of trust they took, and to answer to their dedication.

He knew Nezumi must feel the same.

Shion began to speak.

I don't think I need to tell you about how No. 6 was created. Humankind tried to build a utopia once again on this planet, which was half destroyed by human hands.

Before No. 6 was born, this area was a miraculously preserved stretch of beautiful, abundant forest. I said miraculous, but this land—its forests, woods, and lakes— was actually meant to survive. Elyurias and the Forest People protected this realm. It was because of her that this land's wildlife was spared damage.

No one can explain who or what Elyurias is. Even the name Elyurias was given to her by a researcher. —I met him, in the basement of the Correctional Facility.

"Basement of the Correctional Facility?" Rikiga choked on his juice and had a coughing

fit. "So there *was* a basement in there, after all!"

"There was."

"How about gold bullion? Was there gold bullion in there, Shion?"

"Gold? No. There were people living underground. Back when the Correctional Facility wasn't such a brutal and vigilant incarceration facility, people who escaped but couldn't return above ground began to build their own underground world in secret. The leader of this group was called Rou."

"...So there was no gold, after all." Rikiga hunched over, clearly crestfallen. Inukashi guffawed, baring his teeth.

Rou was a member of a revival project team chosen to design and build No. 6 on this land. Before No. 6 was created, there used to be a small, pretty town at the edge of the forest. People who survived through the waste and decay lived modestly here in a tightly-knit community. This town was the mother of No. 6.

Bright young people were chosen from that town to form a team to build a utopian city.

"My town." Rikiga drew himself up. "That's the town I was born and raised in. It used to be called the Town of Roses—that's how beautiful it was. Karan also used to live there."

"No one asked you, old man." Inukashi bared his teeth even more. "If you're not gonna shut up, I'll tear apart your throat for you."

"I'd like to see you try. You can rip my throat out, but I'll still keep talking. Oh, yes, that revival project team. I heard about them. Back in those days, I was still a pimply youngster chasing after girls and blushing at their ankles. They were holding some kind of selection exam to gather skilled young people from the science fields to make a brighter future for humankind. Yes, yes, I remember."

Rikiga folded his arms and nodded enthusiastically.

"That was how No. 6 began. And not long after that, No. 6 was born as the sixth and best, most optimal utopian city. It grew at an astonishing speed."

"And before you knew it, you dropout failures were shoved outside the walls. Pity," Inukashi said nastily.

"You should be the one keeping your mouth shut, Inukashi. I'll yank out that long tongue of yours and turn it into mincemeat. In those days, I'd just become a journalist. The fact that the city-state was walling itself in, trying to build a barrier around itself, just seemed really shady to me. I wrote a whole slew of articles that talked about it. It was natural that I was thrown out of the city. It was around that time that No. 6 became more and more intolerant and domineering."

It was precisely that.

No. 6 grew at a stunning rate. Its infrastructure, governing bodies and regulations were swiftly and skilfully laid out. In the midst of it all, Rou met Elyurias.

Rou himself wasn't able to define Elyurias well—was she a forest spirit? Or a species of animal unknown to humankind?

The only thing he knew for sure was that Elyurias existed long before the birth of

humankind, protecting this land. The Forest People worshipped her, revered her, and lived in harmony with her.

"Right, so who are these 'forest people' that you keep talking about?"

"Will you shut up, old man? Can't you listen quietly for once? Geez." Inukashi gave an exaggerated sigh.

Shion turned and glanced at Nezumi slumped against the wall. His eyes were closed. His profile was beautiful, but it looked somewhat artificial.

"Glucose transfusion, 50% complete. 50% complete. Continuing transfusion." Aria's eyes blinked green.

Nezumi said nothing. His eyes remained meditatively shut, his body perfectly still.

According to Nezumi, the Forest People are those who have made the forest their home. Since ancient times, they've lived in harmony with the wind, the earth, lakes and rivers, and the sky.

To borrow Rou's words, the forest is a place both of their birth and upbringing. They nurtured, respected, and continued to protect the forest. They lived peacefully within the bounds of nature without desiring prosperity or development. Even those who lived in the Town of Roses had no idea about their existence.

Elyurias' power wasn't what allowed the abundant forest to survive on this land. It was because the Forest People protected it. Through the long, perpetual flow of time, they continued to protect the forest.

Nezumi is a descendant of those Forest People.

Inukashi shifted.

Rikiga let his empty juice bottle roll across the floor. It continued to roll until it hit the doctor's arm, and stopped.

Nezumi is a descendant of the Forest People. He's also a descendant of the "Singers".

"Singers?"

"Yes, Singers—those who had the power to appease Elyurias and converse with her. There were always a number of Singers among the Forest People."

Neither Elyurias nor nature were embodiments of pure compassion and generosity. On the contrary, they could easily turn terrifying. The Forest People knew this.

Both nature and Elyurias could bare their fangs and attack suddenly at any time. Their power was absolute—no human could compare. That made them all the more dreadful.

Yes, the Forest People knew fear. They knew how to fear as well as revere. Singers could appease Elyurias' wrath with their voices, and were able to exchange words with her. They had the ability to mediate between humans and nature. Nezumi had this ability, and so did his mother.

Rou ventured deep into the forest, met Elyurias and the Forest People, and reported their existence to No. 6. He had no idea that this had planted the seed for the Mao Massacre.

"The Mao Massacre?" Creases appeared between Rikiga's eyebrows.

"Yes. 'Mao' apparently refers to the area near the lakeshore where the Forest People lived. They had a settlement there. It's where the airport is now. Apparently the lake was drained to build the airport. I had no idea."

"I didn't know, either," Rikiga said. "I was already kicked out when they started building it. A massacre, huh... which means No. 6 must have invaded the Mao area and tried to wipe out its residents?"

"Yes."

"What for? Did they need land for the airport?"

"No. What they really wanted was Elyurias."

"What for?"

*What for.* Rikiga kept repeating the same question.

What for, what for. Really, what was this for? What made people this brutal, this ruthless?

Shion looked down at the doctor's body. It had lost all its human warmth and was now a cold corpse. The nurse lay beyond it, and beyond her lay an unnamed man.

What made them capable of taking the lives of others so easily?

In the short instant that he closed his eyes, he could see the Hunt unfold again behind his eyelids. He could hear the groans of the people loaded onto the truck's cargo bed. In his ears rang the screams of the people who had died, piled on top of each other in the basement of the Correctional Facility.

*What for?*

Perplexity—not anger—snagged Shion and would not release him. Also, fear.

What set him apart from the central figures of No. 6? Hadn't Rou said so himself? Everyone was young; everyone had hopes to build a utopian city.

It had taken mere decades for these hopes and ideals to mutate. Mere decades. Shion swallowed his breath.

*What kind of person will I be in a few decades? Would I still be able to hold the same hopes and ideals that I have now, at age sixteen? Would I be connected in any form with this kind of brutality?*

The terror was enough to make him shiver.

What did they want Elyurias for? Her special powers.

"Special powers?" Inukashi's mouth fell open as he stared at Shion.

"Yeah. Elyurias embodies the form of a wasp."

"Wasp? Like those things that fly around flowers and stuff?"

"Those would be honeybees. Elyurias is a parasitic wasp. She lays eggs in her hosts."

Inukashi's mouth fell open wider. No words came out.

The eggs hatch inside the host's body. They grow without the host's knowledge, become pupae, and emerge as adults. They tear through the host's body to escape, leaving him behind like an empty shell. This is what's happening to No. 6 right now.

Elyurias' children are all beginning to hatch. They're children who fed off No. 6 citizens in order to grow.

I told you earlier that Elyurias looks like a wasp. But she isn't one. No one knows who or what she really is. Rou has recorded that he thinks she might be between a human and a god. That's why she—since she lays eggs, I'll call her a 'she', but I don't think there's much meaning to distinguishing her sex. Maybe she's taken the form of a wasp because it was a convenient form for her to lay eggs inside the hosts. Maybe she only appears as a wasp to human eyes.

She has an enormous intellect—and intellect that far surpasses that of humankind. And she had the power to exert perfect control over the hosts.

Because of that power, the hosts were programmed to take actions that were favourable to the children of Elyurias, oblivious to the fact that they were being leeches from. For example, their instincts for sensing danger were honed, and they became increasingly sensitive to their nutrition. They were controlled to take every effort to maintain a healthy body; their personalities turned gentle; they began to avoid disputes. It makes sense that No. 6 citizens were the only targets. Think about how malnourished the West Block people are, coupled with their substandard environment... as hosts, they were out of the question. Nezumi mentioned before that the parasitic wasps have gourmet tastes. He turned out to be right.

"Irony, ain't it," Inukashi muttered. "We starved, we froze, we didn't know when we would die... but because of that, we West Block residents were spared."

"These were the absolutely necessary conditions for the eggs: the host needed to be alive when they hatched, and the host needed to be healthy. Even Elyurias couldn't turn the West Block into a paradise. But she didn't need to."

"You've already got the best hosts you could ask for in No. 6."

"That's right."

"The wasps controlled the humans?" This time, it was Rikiga who opened his mouth. He breathed raggedly.

"Yes. They can make people act according to their every whim. It's not unusual for parasitic organisms. A certain schistosome blinds the human immune system and makes it think that it's harmless. A species of parasitic wasp injects its DNA into the caterpillar that it chooses as its host, and disables the caterpillar's immune system completely. But I don't think there's any other example of a highly-functional parasitic organism like Elyurias, who chooses humans as her host and controls them completely without the host's knowledge."

"...And No. 6 wanted that power—the power to completely control and dominate over humans." Rikiga made a choked noise in his throat. It was a dry, brittle sound, similar to the frigid winter wind.

No. 6 had tried to attain Elyurias' power.

They came to know of this mystical power through Rou's investigative reports, and tried to use it in building their government.

Elyurias' characteristics remained a mystery; however, everyone in No. 6 thought of her as a mere insect, a mutant species. They did not think of her as a being halfway between man and god, like Rou did. Not one of them saw her as such. Every person believed firmly that no

being more superior than man existed.

Elyurias was nothing but a queen bee with an unusually large intellect. It would be no large task training her and controlling her according to their needs—that was what they believed.

An investigative squad was formed for the capture of Elyurias, and they set foot into the forest. There, they met adamant resistance by the Forest People.

Elyurias did not constantly reside in the forest. She appeared once every few years, or once every few decades—always unexpectedly. Everything about her—what the necessary conditions were for her appearance, when she laid eggs, and how long she lived afterwards—was a mystery. After she laid her eggs, Elyurias always disappeared. She withdrew from human eyes. A new queen bee emerged from one of the eggs she laid. It was never clear whether that was going to be a few years or decades later.

No one has seen Elyurias' body. From the time this forest appeared on this land, Elyurias had been repeating the same routine, but not a single person had ever seen her corpse.

Among the Forest People, it was said that Elyurias was immortal, that she revived endless times—that her corpse decayed somewhere where no eye could see, and became the forest itself.

When Elyurias appeared, the Forest People appeased her with song. They prayed and pleaded with her that they would not become hosts. They carried out rituals, and offered a Godly Bed. The Godly Bed was a type of man-made host, prepared from animal brains. It was an offering for implantation. Led on by the song, Elyurias would lay her eggs there. After the eggs were laid, the Godly Bed never seemed to rot or dry out; instead, it maintained an adequate level of moisture and freshness until it rotted away with the emergence of the adult wasp.

Yes, it was the same—the same way in which human hosts aged and died within the blink of an eye immediately after the adult wasps emerged.

The Forest People protected the Godly Bed with their bodies and souls. It was part of their promise with her. This rule had been passed on for ages. As long as the Forest People continued to protect the Godly Bed, Elyurias did not inflict any harm on them. She not only protected the people, but the forest and its land.

That was the rule.

No. 6 had burst onto the scene and wrenched everything from them. They had burned down the settlement of the Forest People when they resisted; they had massacred women, children, and the elderly indiscriminately. They had taken the Godly Bed back to No. 6.

The Mao Massacre—the demise of the Forest People.

This incident took place just twelve years ago.

Shion sucked in a huge breath, and exhaled. He felt like there was no other way to let the air reach every corner of his body.

"From here on is my guesswork, not Rou's records. I'm positive that it's true."

Rikiga leaned forward as if to encourage him. Inukashi, on the other hand, shrank back. He grimaced as if he had smelled some unbearable stench.

"The upper echelons of No. 6 probably attempted to hatch Elyurias' eggs artificially in

the Godly Bed that they'd brought back, and failed. They had no Singers, and therefore couldn't maintain the Godly Bed. Nonetheless, they refused to acknowledge anything other than scientific proof. But through their countless failures, one thing they realized was that the most suitable place for the eggs to hatch and grow was inside the human brain."

"Brain?" Rikiga grabbed his head.

"Yes. Not a cow's, pig's, or monkey's. They got as far as determining that Elyurias' eggs hatched if they used a human brain, and that one of them would be born the queen bee, as another Elyurias."

"And then, what...?"

"They implanted eggs inside a number of citizens secretly—just like a wasp would use its ovipositor to lay eggs inside its host. It was easy enough to give a needle during scheduled check-ups, saying it was only part of the procedure. They chose sample citizens who differed in gender, age, build, and environment. I was one of them. Rou was also chosen as a host, but it seems Elyurias' will had some influence in this case. Both of us survived because the parasite's development was incomplete. The host always dies if the adult emerges successfully. That means Elyurias' eggs were effective also as assassination weapons. The upper echelons would do anything to have Elyurias in their power. They were desperate to have her under control. Maybe they already had a faint premonition that cracks would start to form in No. 6. Maybe they knew that their selective and exclusive government would some day break down, no matter how skilfully it was camouflaged. That was why they wanted definite control over others. They wished to be the queen bee, and to reign as the absolute, sole ruler."

"Were front-line research facilities set up in the Correctional Facility to, um, research those... wasps?"

"Yes. They couldn't figure out what kind of conditions Elyurias required to emerge as an adult. I think any human effort would have been fruitless—it would always be a mystery. But they built a research facility anyway, to unravel a mystery that couldn't be unravelled. In it... there were rows of countless brains, contained in special cases. I'm sure eggs were planted in every one."

It came back to him.

The rows of brains trapped in cylindrical cases; Safu, trapped in its innermost depths—it all came back to him.

"I see." Rikiga stroked his chin. "In the Correctional Facility, you could have as many brains as you wanted. Couldn't ask for a better place."

"Makes me sick." Inukashi clutched his chest. He looked truly nauseous: all the colour had receded from his face. He tossed his piece of bread aside.

"I've been starved enough to eat grass and caterpillars off the ground, but I've never felt this sick before. I don't see whatever it is you're seeing. So—was this Hunt a massive harvest of human brains?"

"Yes. They probably wanted to experiment on human brains that have survived harsh conditions. They wanted brains affected by various things, like large amounts of stress, or the will to live, or fear, or excitement."

"I... I think I'm really going to be sick." A dog nuzzled up to Inukashi. He buried his face in its coat and sniffed.

"These guys are... are a hundred times, a thousand times, ten thousand times better than humans. Shion, I'm glad I've got dogs on my team instead of humans. I really am."

"Yeah." *You're right, Inukashi. Dogs are a hundred times, a thousand times, ten thousand times better than humans. I can see why you'd feel that way.*

Inukashi sneezed softly. He sniffled.

"So, what, Nezumi? Are you really a surviving descendant of the Forest People or whatever?"

Nezumi raised his face. The colour had returned to his cheeks, perhaps thanks to Aria's care. It made Nezumi into a glowing, living being rather than a beautiful doll.

"Yes."

"So you survived that Mao Massacre, or whatever it is. Looks like your lucky streak takes you way back, huh."

"Sure."

Nezumi's eyes focused on Shion. Shion returned his gaze without blinking. After a moment of hesitation, Nezumi began to speak.

"I was really young then. To tell you the truth, there's not much I remember about the Mao area. I just remember Gran carrying me on her back as she ran frantically through the flames. I don't know if Gran was my real grandmother, or if she was a total stranger. But she rescued me and raised me. After we escaped from the forest, we moved constantly around in what's now called the West Block."

Nezumi's tone was brisk and seemed to contain no emotion.

"Gran taught me a lot of things. She was also the one who found a room that used to be a library vault, and suggested that I live in it. I buried myself in those books, and I grew up listening to Gran tell tales of the Forest People. These guys—"

Nezumi snapped his fingers. The three mice scurried up to him, squeaking.

"—were born in that room. They're intelligent and can feel emotion. So could their parents, and their grandparents. Those kinds of animals just seemed to gather around the Forest People. These guys and Elyurias were both—well, we didn't call it Elyurias. We just called it the Forest God. But I was too young to know what the Forest God was, anyway. I was taught that only Forest People like us had a connection to these little mice and the Forest God. But they seem completely used to having Shion around, and they seem overjoyed that they've been given names. It was the same with the rats in the underground realm. I was surprised, to tell you the truth."

"Same with my dogs, come to think of it. They've taken such a liking to Shion. They didn't even bark at him."

Nezumi smiled serenely.

"You're a mysterious one, Shion. I thought so since the first time we met—you're a mystery."

"You're talking about the night of the storm."

"Yeah. The night we first met. But let's go back to the topic for now. I was ten when the special gates of the Correctional Facility were completed. The mayor was scheduled for a visit. Gran said it was our first and last chance for revenge. Revenge—Gran said it was the only thing she'd been living for. But a ten-year-old kid and an old woman were no match for him. Gran



had a knife hidden on her, but she was shot on the spot trying to get near the mayor. I was caught along with captives of the Hunt and thrown into the basement of the Correctional Facility. It was a miracle that I didn't die. I climbed the wall of rock as if my life depended on it, and I got to those caverns. That was where I met Rou. Maybe that was a miracle, too. Rou gave me even more knowledge than Gran, and when I turned twelve, he ordered me to leave the underground realm and face a new world. At the time, Rou still had a thread,—a thin one, mind you—of communication leading to the core of No. 6. Once in a while, No. 6 delivered just enough food and living supplies for us to survive. I guess in the back of their minds, their conscience still nagged them to help the man who was once their colleague. Through that route, Rou sent in a suggestion that I be transferred to the Moondrop. He proposed to have me examined in detail as one of the last surviving Forest People. The mayor and his associates agreed. They'd probably reached a roadblock in their research about the Forest God. They were eager for any potential lead, so they jumped on the chance. On the day of my transfer, Rou handed me a special knife that wouldn't get caught by the metal detectors. He told me to find my own path. I wouldn't survive if I let myself be taken into the Moondrop. There was a good chance that I'd be dissected there. My only path of survival was to break free and run before I reached the Moondrop. As for the rest—I don't think I need to go into details. I was able to survive, thanks to you rescuing me."

Nezumi looked up at the ceiling and exhaled a long breath.

"Like I said before, on that stormy night, you threw open the window and welcomed me in. It was a real miracle. To me, you were more of a miracle than the Forest God ever was. I felt like I was being told to live—to live on, not give up.... If you hadn't been there, I wouldn't have been able to survive that night. Shion, you—only you—were the one who saved me. This time, too."

Nezumi stood up carefully.

"Glucose infusion completed. Infusion is complete." Aria retreated silently like a meek maiden.

"You saved my life," Nezumi said.

"It goes both ways. If it hadn't been for you, I wouldn't be alive, either." Shion stood up as well.

"Hey, hey, wait a minute here. If you're gonna overwhelm yourselves with gratitude, it should be for us. Right, old man?"

"Of course. Eve, you've just made yourself a hell of a debt. You better be prepared."

Inukashi and Rikiga nodded in unison.

"Practically finishing each other's sentences now, aren't you? You've sure gotten close." Nezumi smirked as he wrapped himself in the superfibre cloth.

"If you're going to keep tabs on my debt anyway, mind giving me a ride and dropping me off close to the Moondrop?"

"Are you really going to go?" Rikiga said in disbelief.

"Yes, we are," Shion answered. "We have to. Nezumi is the only one who can stop Elyurias."

"Don't get ahead of yourself. We don't even know if my singing is going to work on her yet."

"It will. Even on that cargo bed on the way to the Correctional Facility, people still wanted to hear you sing."

Rikiga swung his arm around. His weary and bloodshot eyes blinked repeatedly.

"Why, Eve? I thought you were going to sit back and enjoy the show as part of the audience. Weren't you going to laugh the whole way through while you watched No. 6 give its last dying shriek?"

"I was planning to, but it looks like my career as an actor will be the death of me," Nezumi said ruefully. "Seems I can't stand being out of the spotlight for more than a short while. I guess I'm not made to sit in the audience, after all."

"This isn't the time to be showing off," Rikiga said biting. "Take it seriously. I thought you loathed No. 6. Just leave it alone, and it'll destroy itself. There's nothing more you have to do except sit back, watch, and laugh."

Nezumi's face contorted for an instant. It did not look like an act.

"I would if I could. But Rou told me—what about the children within the walls? What are they guilty of? He said those who twiddle their thumbs while they watch children die are no better than the murderers themselves."

A sigh. All emotion vanished from Nezumi's face.

"Old man, I do loathe No. 6. This destruction is what I've been longing for. In fact, it's everything I could have wished for. If I ended up bloodying my hands to attain it, so be it—that's what I used to think, and I still think that way. But I want to avoid killing children at all costs. I'm a survivor of the Mao Massacre. The last thing I want to do is be on the side of the murderers. I don't want to become like No. 6."

Rikiga fell silent. He sighed like Nezumi, and took out his car keys.

"Inukashi, what are you doing to do?"

"I'll go. Don't got a choice, do I? I've got my own baby to worry about. I can understand what Nezumi's trying to say. Heh, but I didn't expect to be completely convinced. I must be getting old."

"Oh—Inukashi, by baby, do you mean the one I entrusted—"

"Shut up. He's my baby, and it's none of your business. A little slow to notice, huh, uncaring prick? You can beg on your knees asking to see him, but you won't get a chance." Inukashi neatly gathered up all the leftover food and stuck his long tongue out at Shion.

Confusion was reaching its peak around the Moondrop. The army had fired further shots into the knots of people, resulting in even more deaths. At the same times, several soldiers also fell to the ground, growing old and dying within minutes.

A roar of fear erupted from the soldiers. As some threw their guns aside and attempted to run, their superiors shot them dead from behind.

"Obey your orders. Suppress the rioters. Disperse them."

"No! Our lives are precious to us, too!"

"Don't even think about fleeing. Desert the battlefield—the penalty is death," a senior officer barked. Suddenly, he bent backwards and collapsed. Blood spurted from his forehead. A bullet had ricocheted and hit him, perhaps—or had someone shot him? Even while his body convulsed, the soldiers trampled him with their military boots in an attempt to escape.

The crowd swarmed into the Moondrop. In their midst, each gate of the city exploded and dissolved in flames. Cracks appeared in the special alloy barrier as it, too, fell apart. The Correctional Facility was already half-demolished in a cloud of black smoke.

The bigscreen monitors in the square displayed each of these scenes.

"Shion, what the hell is going on there? Why are they playing that? Is No. 6 showing everyone its demise on purpose?" Inukashi asked with a shiver.

"That must be surveillance footage from the cameras installed in each part of the city.... But that should be playing on the screens in the monitoring room of the Security Bureau. This footage is being forwarded to public screens... which means the computer's controls have gone completely haywire."

"And that must be...."

"Yeah, you're right. Only she can scramble No. 6's controls like this."

*Chuckle, chuckle, chuckle.*

*Chuckle, chuckle, chuckle.*

He could hear lighthearted laughing. It reached his ears, threading its way through the roar of the mob, footsteps, screams, and the sound of something being beaten like a drum.

*Chuckle, chuckle, chuckle.*

*Chuckle, chuckle, chuckle.*

*She's laughing. She's trying to destroy No. 6, laughing all the while.*

"Nezumi, can you sing?"

"...Not here. It's too packed with people. I'll be out of breath before long, especially in this condition." Nezumi looked up at the night sky, his face shining with perspiration.

"She's laughing," he muttered.

"You hear it?" Shion asked.

"Yeah. She sounds like she's enjoying herself. Arrogant humans thought they were the rulers of the world, and now look how easily they destroy themselves—she's relishing every minute of it."

"Is she punishing human hubris?"

"Or it might be fate," Nezumi answered. "No. 6 was fated to become like this. A balloon will always burst if it's blown up too much. Maybe she just sped up those cogwheels of fate a little bit."

*Chuckle, chuckle, chuckle.*

*Chuckle, chuckle, chuckle.*

A man clutching a boy of about five ran past Shion.

"Help me, help me!" he cried through his tears.

"Nezumi, let's go to the top floor of the Moondrop."

"The mayor's office?"

"Yeah. Your voice will reach the entire square from there. Not only will Elyurias hear your song, so will the rest of the people."

"A song won't calm the confusion."

"It'll be more effective than guns. That much is for sure."

They went along with the flow of people and entered the Moondrop.

"Where's the mayor? Bring him out!"

"This is the end of No. 6! We're done for!"

"The wall has crumbled! The gates have been broken!"

"Bring out the vaccines! Mayor! *Mayor!*"

Suddenly, one man dashed up the stairs. With a megaphone in hand, he bellowed in the stairwell.

"Comrades, I am here! I am Yoming! I once urged you to rise for freedom!"

The crowd buzzed.

"It's Yoming! Yoming!"

"Yes! Comrades, just moments ago, I was attacked by the security squad and I was almost killed. But yet I still stand here in front of you. I will not die until I finish rebuilding No. 6 with my own two hands. I will not die—I am immortal!"

The buzz grew louder. A mass of fists were raised triumphantly towards the man.

"Yoming! Yoming! Our hero!"

"Comrades. No. 6's destruction is near. We're almost there. Let us defeat No. 6, come together as one, pool our strength, and build a new utopia. We will make our bright future a reality, with our hands, comrades!"

"Yeah! That's right!"

"Three cheers for Yoming! Three cheers for a new No. 6!"

"Comrades, let us drag the mayor and his people out before us. Here we will sentence and obliterate them. Let that be the first step towards a new world!"

Cries of assent melded together into one roar. It shook the very air.

"No!"

Shion also dashed up the stairs to stand beside Yoming. "That's wrong. What he's saying isn't right."

Yoming's eyes bulged as he gritted his teeth.

"Everyone, listen to me: there is no vaccine here. What's happening right now isn't going to be stopped by the likes of any vaccine."

"Hey, what are you—"

"I survived." Shion took off his shirt and flung it aside, exposing his red banded scars. "This is proof of my survival. Everyone, please. Give us a little bit—ten minutes—of your time. Don't worry, we'll settle this somehow. I survived. There's nothing stopping you from surviving, too. But for that to happen, we need time."

"What are we supposed to do?" A voice questioned weakly from the crowd. It was a female voice. "Tell us what we're supposed to do."

"Keep waiting," Shion answered. "Wait just a little bit longer, and everything will come to an end. No one has to die anymore."

*Wait, he says.*

*So we just wait here.*

*For half an hour or so.*

Like a breeze blowing ripples across the surface of a lake, a silent wave spread throughout the crowd. Everyone gradually began to sit down on the spot. People in the square also squatted on the ground, hugging their knees.

"Thank you, everyone." Still holding the megaphone, Shion also spoke to the dumbfounded man before him. "You, too, Yoming. Wait here."

Yoming was speechless.

"I'm going ahead." Nezumi broke into a run, passing behind Shion.

"How on earth did you...." Yoming murmured as he gazed at Shion.

There was no one in front of the mayor's office. The guards had likely fled as well. What used to be the safest and most comfortable place in No. 6 was now highly dangerous territory.

Shion knocked on the door.

"Come in," a calm voice answered through the intercom beside the door.

The door slid aside soundlessly.

The room was warm, tranquil, and luxurious. The mayor was standing in front of a wide writing desk near the wall. He had a smaller frame than what Shion had imagined. And he was young.

*This man... is the ruler of No. 6.*

There was a leather sofa beside the mayor, and another man sat at the end of it. He was wearing a white lab coat. His neck was bent at an odd angle, and his arms dangled lifelessly. His hair had turned white before Shion's eyes, and his mouth hung open, having already taken its last breath. A tooth dislodged itself from the man's mouth and landed on the floor.

"Oh...."

A wasp was sitting on the nape of the man's neck, moving its antennae busily.

"It's a newborn," the mayor whispered. He sounded like someone who was trying not to wake a sleeping baby. "I had no idea it was living inside his body, either. But I think he was the most surprised. He died without even getting over his astonishment. 'It can't be'—" the mayor smiled faintly. "Those were his last words. 'It can't be'. Hah, it must be decades since I heard something like that come out of his mouth. He believed that everything in the world could be explained by science."

"Mayor. Please open the window. We're going to use your balcony."

"What do you intend to do?"

"We want to speak with Elyurias. We need to meet her, and it's urgent."

"You kids know about Elyurias?"

"Yes."

The mayor's gaze shifted from Shion to Nezumi.

"Window, you say..." he muttered, and pushed a button on his desk. The window slowly opened out.

"Nezumi."

"Yeah."

Nezumi stepped out onto the balcony. A wind blew up at them, ruffling Nezumi's hair. A song flowed forth.

*The wind steals the soul away, humans thief the heart  
O earth, wind, and rain; O heavens, O light  
Keep everything here*

*Keep everything here, and  
Live in this place  
O soul, my heart, O love, my feelings true  
Return home here  
And stay*

Nezumi's singing was picked up by the wind, and seemed to reach every corner of the square—and every corner of No. 6. The people sat perfectly still and listened in a trance.

It was like a voice that stole the soul away and thieved the heart.

*Safu. Shion spoke to the girl in his heart. Just once—just once more, lend me your strength.  
Deliver this song to Elyurias. Safu, please. Lend us your power.*

*The wind steals the soul away, humans thief the heart  
But here I will stay  
to keep singing  
Please  
Deliver my song  
Please  
Accept my song*

*Safu.*

The wind grew stronger. Nezumi staggered.

"Ah!"

Inukashi stood still, rooted to the spot.

"Wh—What the hell—"

A golden ring appeared in the sky, squarely in front of Nezumi. The ring shrank until it became a blinding light. The light shimmered as it wavered, and turned into the figure of a wasp.

*It has been a while, Singer.*

"It really has." Nezumi turned around and beckoned to Shion.

*Come closer.*

Shion stepped out onto the balcony and drew up beside Nezumi. The crowd filling the square looked up all at once.

"Elyurias. Do you mind if I call you by this name?"

*As you please. A name given by a human means nothing to me.*

"Elyurias. We beg you. We want you to grant us one more chance—just once."

Shion heard the beating of wings. Four transparent wings glimmered as they beat the

air.

"Please don't give up on us humans yet. Just once. Give us one more chance, Elyurias."

*Foolish creatures.*

*Creatures full of arrogance and deceit.*

*You are telling me to believe you?*

"Humans are capable of both upholding ideals and succumbing to corruption. There are those who cling onto their power, and there are those who are pushed along by the majority. But there are those who uphold their ideals, live for others, and continue to fight against their own foolishness, deceit, and arrogance. Elyurias, hear our plea. Believe in us, just once more."

*Is that what you wish for yourself, Singer?*

Nezumi gave a slight nod.

*As one of the Forest People, you will believe in the residents of No. 6?*

"I won't believe the people of No. 6. The only one I believe is him. No—that's not it. It's not that I believe him. It's just—"

*Just?*

"I want to see what Shion will become. I want to see what he's going to build on the ruins of No. 6. I want to see with my own eyes what he'll create."

*You want to see.*

"O God—Forest God, you yourself aren't omnipotent. You can't see everything. There's no way you could predict whether he'll create a future that's different from No. 6, or follow in its footsteps. It's something to look forward to, isn't it? How far will humans fall? Where would they be able to dig in their heels and resist? See where it'll take them—that's just another way to enjoy it. I think you're jumping the gun if you think humans are hopeless because of a small example like No. 6."

*The tiny infant I remember seems to have grown into an insolent one.*

"People grow up. For better or for worse."

*Singer, are you sure? You do not need to keep loathing No. 6?*

"No. 6 doesn't exist anymore. You destroyed it. But if No. 6 were to appear here again, I'd hate it with my heart and soul, and wage another war."

Elyurias' antennae quivered left and right. Golden powder scattered from them.

*Shion.*

"Yes."

*I have a message from Safu. She says, "I leave everything in your hands".*

*Everything in your hands.* They were the same as the doctor's dying words. Shion clenched his hand into a fist, and nodded.

"Please tell Safu that I've gotten her message. And please tell her that I'll never forget her for as long as I live."

*Understood.*

*Now, then.*

"Elyurias, wait! Please, for us—"

*Just once. This one single time, Shion.*

The golden light disappeared. The wind ceased.

Shion went back inside the room, and sank onto the carpeted floor.

"It's finally over."

"Over? This is just the start, Shion. Your battle is beginning, and it's going to be an arduous one."

"Nezumi...."

"What kind of world will you build here in the place of No. 6? Would you be able to build a real town, where humans can live as humans—and not some parasitic city wearing the mask of a utopia? Shion, your battle has just begun. You haven't finished. The one whose end is nigh is—"

Nezumi turned around and stared at the mayor.

"I know." The mayor sat down in his chair, and quietly closed his eyes. "Could you excuse yourselves? I would like to be alone."

"Going to think about what to do with yourself, Mayor?" Rikiga growled.

"That has already been decided. I'll put an end to my own affairs. So, please, if you will."

"Let's go. Everyone deserves to have their last wishes respected." Nezumi started to walk out.

"You have my thanks." The mayor raised his hand.

The door closed.

A gunshot rang out almost at the same time. Rikiga shook his head slowly.

Hamlet squeaked from Shion's pocket.

*Cheep-cheep-cheep!*



A cerulean sky.

The sky that unfolded over the small hill in the North Block was crystal clear.

"Nice weather. Perfect for travelling." The wind tousled Nezumi's hair, and he smoothed it down with his hand.

"Shion, right here is fine. You didn't have to come out to see me off."

"...You're set on going?"

"I have to."

"When are you coming back?"

"Coming back? I don't have a place to return to."

"Nezumi, can't I... can't I go with you?"

"You and I are different. I'm a drifter; you're stationary. That's what it boils down to. When you're incompatible, you can't live together. You should know this already."

Nezumi let his gaze wander over the scene that spread below him.

Here was a city once called No. 6. From where he stood, it seemed no different than how it had always been.

"Shion."

"What?"

"Are you crying?"

"I'm not—geez, I'm not a girl—"

"I'm afraid of you."

"What?"

"I can't seem to grasp anything that's inside you, that's why. You're a mystery. You had the power to put all the people at the Moondrop in the palm of your hand in two seconds flat, yet here you are crying like a girl. You can be utterly ruthless, courageous, and noble all at once. And that's all part of who you are, isn't it? I can't understand it, and that's why it's terrifying for me. Maybe sometime in the future, it wouldn't be so bad for me to drop by to see... yeah, to see what kind of person you've become. Your mama's muffins are also hard to resist. But I didn't expect to get a hug from her right after being introduced."

"Nezumi."

Shion grasped Nezumi's arm. He felt like he could endure no more.

"Don't go, Nezumi. I want to be by your side. I want you to be by my side. That's all I wish for."

"It can't happen."

"Why not?"

"How many times are you going to make me repeat myself? You have to stay here. You have a job to do."

"I can just let someone else—"

"You can't let anyone else do it. Shion, *you* have to do this. Did you forget your promise with Safu? What about the doctor's last words? You said you'd take it. Shion, don't run away. You have a battle to fight. You have a job to do here. You can't turn your back on it."

Shion looked at his feet.

He tightened his grip around Nezumi's arm.

*I know. I understand. But—*

"Nezumi, the world means nothing to me without you. Nothing."

A finger hooked on his chin, and yanked it upwards.

A set of dark grey eyes were right in front of him.

"Won't you listen, my stubborn child? Act your age." It was a woman's voice, softened with laughter.

"Nezumi, I'm serious—"

Their lips overlapped. It was a searing, but gentle, passionate kiss.

"Was that a... goodbye kiss?"

"A vow." Nezumi smiled. "Reunion will come, Shion."

Nezumi turned his back to him. Hamlet and Cravat hopped onto his shoulder, and chirruped at each other.

*Cheep-cheep-cheep. Cheep-cheep-cheep.*

The wind blew.

The clouds panned out.

Nezumi's figure grew smaller and smaller.

He never turned around once.

"Nezumi." *I never found out your real name. But—I don't need to know.*

To Shion, Nezumi had always been Nezumi. His one and only, irreplaceable person.

*Nezumi, I'll keep waiting. No matter how many years it takes, no matter how old I get, I'll keep waiting for you right here, on this land.*

The drifter and the stationary one—their paths were bound to intersect again. And when they did, Shion would not let him go again so easily.

*Nezumi, I'll keep waiting for you.*

The wind blew.

Sunlight streamed down—on Shion; on the city about to be reborn; on Nezumi's vestige.

The light streamed down, and encompassed everything.

## Epilogue

"Nezumi, this book—"

"It's Shakespeare. *Macbeth*. Ever heard of it?"

"Are all these books classics?"

- No. 6 Volume 1

It was a letter from Inukashi. He hadn't received one in a while.

*Doing alright Shion?*

*Its the same old here. Old man Rikiga is having a ball because the wall is gone and he can go wherever he wants. Now he gets too see your Mum. Be careful. You never know whats gonna happen in life. If that old man somehow ends up becoming your stepfather, thats a tragidy man.*

*Your Mum sent over some apple pie and rolls the other day, to me and my Shionn. They were phenomenol. Tell her thanks. Shionn is going to turn 3 soon (dunno for sure, since I don't know his birthday).*

*Do you think you can help out with dog-washing on your next day off? So I heard your a member of the city's "Restructurell Comittee" or whatever, huh? I feel bad for asking a bigshot like you, but we need good washers.*

*Any way, no matter how big of a bigshot you become, to me you'll always be an airheaded little boy.*

*Hope you can find the time.*

-Inu

Shion carefully folded the letter scribbled on rough paper, and put it away. *I'm going, Inukashi.*

*Cheep-cheep-cheep!*

Tsukiyo cried at his feet. This mouse had chosen to remain by Shion's side. He was a little older now, but was as energetic and bright as ever. Karan was his absolute favourite person, and he slept in her bed at night.

Another letter was from someone Shion had not dreamed of receiving word from. It was from Satori, the man in the underground realm. A few days ago, Shion had been paid a visit by a sewer rat carrying the letter in its mouth. In it was written a short message of thanks.

*Relocation in the forest going smoothly, thanks to you.*

*You have my gratitude for your efforts.*

Following the destruction of the Correctional Facility, the people of the underground realm had fled into the forest on Rou's orders.

*Promise them a land where they can live in peace.* Shion had forwarded Rou's short message

to the Restructural Committee, and gotten permission to allocate a part of the northern forest to those people.

The land was on the outskirts of Mao, where the Forest People used to live. The dense expanse of forest protected their eyes, which were sensitive to bright sunlight because of the darkness they were accustomed to. Shion had chosen this spot after much deliberation.

Rou chose to remain underground. He ended his life there, along with a few elders.

The remains of the Correctional Facility have now become a park. Inukashi mentioned that he took Shionn there to play sometimes.

*Time ambles along.*

*Everything changes.*

*But I'll never forget.*

Shion got up, and stood by the window. He threw it wide open.

*Come on in, Nezumi—just like you did that night.*

Only a breeze, thick with the scent of young leaves, blew at him in return.

He kept waiting.

No. 6—a city by that name once existed here.

It had existed, once the epitome of human intelligence, a utopian city-state.

SIDE STORY<sup>5</sup>  
Days in the West Block

There was not a cloud in the sky that day in the West Block, and it was bright and clear. It was truly a cerulean sky.

But of course, since the West Block lay in the shadow of No. 6, daylight hours were always short no matter how sunny it was. In the winter, it was especially so.

Shion looked up at the sky, and gave a huge stretch. The suds on his hands turned into small bubbles that floated into the air above.

They reflected the light and sparkled in rainbow-coloured hues.

"It's such a nice day today."

The blue of the sky and the light from the bubbles stung his eyes.

"Hey, Shion. Get a move on." Inukashi looked up from making soap suds in a bucket to glare at Shion. The light on his raven hair made it look even more black.

"Take your sweet time, and the sun'll be down before you know it. We gotta finish washing the dogs by afternoon. 'Cause if they don't get washed by then, we'll have to burn a whole extra fire just to dry them off. It's a waste of firewood."

"Oh, right. Yeah. Sorry about that."

"Well... you don't have to apologize, or anything." Inukashi sniffed his nose. "You're just way too thorough. You just gotta wash 'em quick, rinse 'em off quick, and you're done. My dogs aren't princesses."

"But if you don't rinse them off properly, they're going to get skin infections."

"Skin infections? That true?"

"Yeah. I've started reading more animal-related books since I started to work here. Nezumi's got all sorts of books in his house."

Inukashi wrinkled his nose. He flapped his hand in front of his face as if to wave away an odour.

"Do me favour and don't mention his name around me, will ya? Makes me feel sick. If you're gonna read something, at least read something like 'How to Exterminate Sneaky Rats'."

Shion couldn't help but smile wryly.

"I remember seeing a book on how to exterminate regular rats."

"Heh, regular methods aren't gonna work on someone like him. But that's enough of that. Why did you hafta bring up the world's most obnoxious guy on such a nice day?"

"Do you hate Nezumi that much?"

"Damn right I do." Inukashi spread his arms widely. "Even if someone gave me a hundred gold coins to like him, I couldn't. If it was possible, I'd avoid associating with him for my whole life."

"Inukashi, I think that's being a bit harsh."

"Heh, harsh? You must be kidding me. I haven't even said half of what I wanna say. That old man's a fake, but compared to Nezumi, he's as innocent and harmless as a newborn baby. Shion, lemme tell ya something: there's nobody more dangerous, disagreeable, and a pain in the

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5 This was included in the limited edition Volume 4 of the manga.

ass than Nezumi."

Shion stopped midway through washing a dappled brown dog.

*He's more dangerous, troublesome, strong, and beautiful than anyone else in the world. That's Nezumi.*

He caught Inukashi looking at him. He felt like Inukashi had seen right through his thoughts, and his cheeks burned. Shion looked down to hide his flushed face, and scratched the dappled dog on the back. The dog seemed to enjoy it, for he narrowed his eyes and let out a quiet growl of pleasure.

"And?" Inukashi pressed.

"Hm?"

"That skin infection you were talking about earlier. So it's bad if I don't rinse them properly?"

"Oh—yeah, that's right. When there's soap residue left on the skin, it could cause rashes and the fur can fall out. You have to wash the soap off properly."

"You serious? I can't afford my dogs getting any skin infections, man. I wouldn't even be able to rent 'em out at the hotel. Shion," he said briskly, "rinse 'em good. Get all the soap out. Be extra careful about the ones with long fur."

"Alright, but I don't think I'd be able to get through all the dogs by sunset. Should I finish the rest off tomorrow?"

"Tomorrow, huh." Inukashi looked up at the sky, and squinted at the rays that shone down upon him.

"Shion, wanna know something else, while I'm at it? No one makes promises about 'tomorrow' here in the West Block. Doesn't matter how important that person is to you, or anything. There's no such thing as a 'tomorrow' here. Sure, today might be the sunniest, warmest, most beautiful day ever. But no one knows if it's gonna be the same tomorrow. Actually, the weather usually takes a turn for the worse after days like this. A cold wind comes, and you start seeing flurries of snow. Then the ground freezes over, along with your feet, the water from the spring, and everything else around you. Starving kids and old people start dying. Same for young, brawny guys, too. They're not free from death. Say, for example... he's walking down the street one day, with a loaf of bread that he's worked all day to get. He could get attacked from behind by a group of kid thugs who are after his food, get his skull cracked open, and it's off to heaven for him. These cases aren't uncommon. Oh yeah, you've experienced it before too, right? Some starving brats mugged you and took your bread in the marketplace?"

"Ah—yeah, that's happened before."

"Knowing you, you probably didn't even put up much of a struggle when they tried to steal your bread. That's 'cause you don't know how much a slice of bread is worth in these parts. My dog told me you practically gave your bread and meat away. He wasn't very impressed."

"Your dog was watching?"

"You bet he was. I sell information, man, it's my business. My dogs are everywhere in the West Block, sniffing stuff out. Your airheaded antics aren't worth much in terms of information, though, just to tell ya."

"I can see that."

Inukashi shrugged, and sighed impatiently.

"Well, you got your bread stolen because you were quiet—or spaced out, more like. It's embarrassing, but you might call it lucky. If you struggled like no tomorrow, they'd try harder to take it away from you. Who knows, worst-case, you might've been whacked from behind with a metal bar and had your brains splattered on the street."

Shion clutched his head reflexively. Inukashi curled up, cackling lightheartedly.

"I hear you've got some good brains, but they'd be no use if they were splattered all over the place, huh?"

"You're giving me the chills."

The smile vanished from Inukashi's face. He gazed at Shion with a stony expression.

"No one knows about tomorrow. Not a single soul here is absolutely sure that they can live to see it, Shion."

Shion directed his gaze to the sky once again.

Under this cerulean sky, there existed tragic life and death. There existed lives easily wrenched away. There were people who had to claw and struggle to even see a faint image of tomorrow. It was his own affair as much as everyone else's. *There's nothing ensuring me whether I'll even be alive tomorrow.*

*That's reality.*

*The reality of the world I live in.*

*I can't avert my eyes from it. I can't turn a blind eye, or simply let it slide. I have to face, and accept this reality.*

"Hey-hey, Shion." Inukashi clapped his hands. The sound echoed crisply in the clear sky. "If you got time to be spaced out, get a move on. That's one of your biggest flaws, eh—thinking too much about everything. Before you start mulling over this or that, get your body moving and get some work done. That's a hundred times more useful."

"Another of your teachings, huh, Inukashi."

"Yeah. I'm a gold mine of the kind of wisdom you need to live well. I gave you some advice for free, so you better be thankful."

"I am. Thank you."

Inukashi visibly shuddered. "Shion, I'm begging you, don't be so frank about saying thanks. It makes my skin crawl."

"But I really did feel thankful—" Shion protested.

"Geez, I don't think I've ever met someone as honest and simple as you. I can't see how you can live with such an unfathomable, shifty, difficult, and twisted guy like Nezumi. Is it true what they say about how opposites do well together?"

"Inukashi, you're being harsh again. Nezumi isn't shifty or twisted. I know he can be... difficult sometimes, or hard to see through, but..."

"Dumb ass! That's what I'm saying when I say you're naive. Nezumi is as shifty as it gets, just as much as you with your airheadedness. You should get a certificate for that, by the way. Hah, I guess if you think about it that way, you two *are* actually kind of alike."

"Bit rude, that, Inukashi."

Inukashi bolted up. He snapped his eyes open wide, and whirled around. Shion also twisted around to look, his hands still covered in suds.

Nezumi was standing there, catching the soft winter rays. His shoulder-length hair

glowed and shimmered in the sun. His lips were curled sardonically, but mirth sparkled in his eyes.

"How long have you been there?" Inukashi swallowed hard.

"Just a little while."

"What do you mean, just a little while?"

"Right about when you were saying you wanted to know about How to Exterminate Sneaky Rats."

Inukashi sighed. He turned to face Shion, and gave a great scowl.

"See what I mean, Shion? This guy sneaked up from behind us, and made sure we didn't even notice as he eavesdropped on our conversation. You can't trust yourself to do anything around this guy."

"Rude again, Inukashi. I wasn't eavesdropping. You weren't even talking about anything worth listening to. You guys were too into your animated little chat to notice my presence, that's all."

"What do you want?" Inukashi said brusquely.

"Don't get so worked up over it, Inukashi," Nezumi drawled. "I just thought I'd swing by. I wasn't expecting to be treated to tea or lunch, or anything like that."

"Damn right you weren't," Inukashi said with bared teeth. "I wouldn't give you a single bowl of soup if I could help it. If you want me to empty it over your head, that's another story."

"Oh dear, see how the boy hates me. But not to worry, I'd turn down the soup anyway. God knows what you'd put into it."

"Say what you will." Inukashi clicked his tongue irritably, and resumed washing his dog with even greater zeal. "Hey, Shion. Never mind Nezumi. The dogs are the ones that need attention. Twenty-one left, and we're gonna finish washing them by sunset."

"Got it. Oh, Nezumi."

"What?"

"Can you help us?"

"What?" Nezumi said incredulously.

"You're off work today, aren't you?"

"Well, yeah, but..."

"Then help us. We're short-staffed here."

"You're telling me to wash a dog?"

"Yup."

"No thanks. Nothing is worse than inferior soap, water, and dog hair, especially if they're combined. The state it would put my hands in..." Nezumi clenched his fingers softly. Just that gesture was elegant enough to make one's breath catch.

"Then I want you to towel down the dogs after I finish washing them," Shion said promptly. "Get as much moisture out of their fur as you can."

"Like I said, why do I have to associate with these mutts—"

"Please. Help out." Shion held out a bunch of rags toward Nezumi. Nezumi drew his chin back in disgust.

"Hey, Shion—"

"This dog first. Wipe him down thoroughly. Quickly, though. He's an old dog, so if you



leave him wet for too long, he might catch a cold. Careful about that. Come on, boy, you have to ask him nicely too," he added to the dog.

The dappled dog shook his coat vigorously at Nezumi's feet. Water droplets flew in all directions.

"Hey—stop that! You're drenching *me*," Nezumi complained.

"So wipe him down. Come on."

"Geez, why do *I* have to take care of the dogs..."

Nezumi nevertheless began to towel the dog off with a rag.

"Nezumi, you can't scrub like that. You have to wrap it gently, and let the cloth suck up the moisture. I know that rag is tattered, but it absorbs water well."

"Shut up. I know how to wipe a dog without getting instructions from you."

"See, the dog doesn't like it. You're being too rough."

"I know that. God, are you my mother or what?"

Inukashi hunched his shoulders and chuckled.

"You guys are hilarious as always. The way you two go on about it is just *classic*. You know, you guys could probably enter a stand-up competition. Eh, Eve? Maybe you're more fit for comedy instead of singing onstage."

Just as Nezumi opened his mouth to reply, Rikiga peeped out from between the ruins. His entire face was red.

"Holy, you stink of booze," Inukashi complained loudly. "You in Drunkard Mode already, old man? It's still morning." He pinched his nose.

"Ha ha, big deal. Like they say, God's in his heaven, and all's right with the world. Cheers t' a peaceful morning! Oh, morning t'you, too, Shion. How're you?"

"Good morning, Rikiga-san. You're in a good mood."

"Just seeing your face puts me in a good mood, y'know. *Whoa*—Eve, what are *you* doing here?"

"It's not like I want to be here."

"I jus' came to see Shion's face—" Rikiga slurred, "why do I hafta see you or Doggy Boy? This is *highly unpleasant*—"

"Cut the crap," Inukashi snapped. "This is *my* hotel. You invited yourself here, you've got no right to complain."

Rikiga ignored Inukashi completely.

"Shion, I brought you something real good. Have it for lunch. Here!"

Rikiga offered him a paper bag. Shion peered inside, and gave a small shout.

"Whoa, muffins!"

"Muffins?" Inukashi swiped the bag from him. "Whoa, cool! So these are what they call muffins, huh? I've never seen them before. It smells awesome." His tan nose twitched busily.

Nezumi gave a short, appreciative whistle.

"Where'd you nick so many, old man?"

"Idiot, the Great Mr. Rikiga would never steal. I'm not like you. Someone gave them to me. Heh heh," he chortled proudly. "These muffins are from No. 6. One of my customers brought them as a small gift. So how do you like 'em? They're from a bakery that's supposedly famous for their muffins. Hah, see? Even though I'm all the way in the West Block, I can still get

my hands on muffins from No. 6. Pretty amazing, aren't I? Heh heh."

"What, so you came to brag? Give me a break. I didn't think you were *that* pathetic, old man Rikiga."

"So Doggy-boy thinks he can be a smartmouth now?" Rikiga replied indignantly.

"Rikiga-san, do you have time right now?" Shion cut in.

"Huh? Me? Well, I am a successful businessman. Men of property like me don't have to slave the day away like poor people."

"Then I'm sure you could help us with washing the dogs."

"Huh? Washing the dogs? Wait a minute, Shion. I only came to drop off these muffins for you, and—"

"Please, if you could pour water over them with this bucket here. Slowly, and evenly."

"No, what I'm saying is, Shion—"

"You're a great help. Now, we should be able to get everything done by evening."

"Yes, but Shion, I never said I would—"

"Give it up, old man." Nezumi gave a small smile. "Do as you're told and get it over with."

Then he turned to Shion and pointed his thumb up.

"You've gotten awfully good at getting people to do your bidding, Shion."

"Well, you trained me, so..."

Rikiga punctuated the air with a single sigh. Then, mumbling something under his breath, he lifted the bucket.

The sun had begun to dip and darkness had begun to settle on the West Block by the time they had finished washing the dogs.

"Good work, everyone. Tonight, I'll give you guys a special treat of soup and drinks. You're welcome." Inukashi stared around with his hands on his hips at the three sitting down on the ground.

"This is a joke!" Rikiga grumbled. "You wore us down to the ground without even any lunch to eat. Give me my muffins." Rikiga shook his fist in the air.

"So like I said, I'm gonna let you guys eat now. *With* soup and drinks."

"You mean water, right?" said Rikiga sourly. Nezumi smiled wryly.

"Water, properly boiled," he added. "It's still warm. Come on, everyone, let's dig in. It's a feast."

Two muffins each, hot water in tin cups, and thin soup seasoned with salt. In the West Block, it definitely fell into the category of a feast.

*This taste—*

Shion's heart thudded loudly as he took a bite of his muffin,

It tasted like his mother's baking. They tasted just like Karan's muffins.

*Can it be—*

*Where did you—?*

Shion swallowed his words a moment shy of posing Rikiga the question.

There was a wall between his mother and him.

Right now, it was a wall over which he had no way to climb.

He could not ask a question if he knew the answer would do him no good.

His gaze met Nezumi's.

You're right, Nezumi.

*That's it, Shion. Keep silent, not because you've given up, but because you've made the decision. You have to shoulder the weight of your silence.*

I know.

*Do you? Maybe you just think you know.*

Nezumi's gaze pierced through him. Those grey eyes gave Shion the impression that they knew everything. He wondered why every time he was held by this gaze, he felt a shiver of bliss rather than pain.

"Ah, but I have to say, nothing tastes better than a meal after a hard day's work." Rikiga gave a great yawn.

"From now on, you should vow to dedicate yourself to honest labour more often, old man."

"Heh, I don't want to hear the word 'honest' come from the likes of you."

Half-listening to Inukashi and Rikiga bickering, Shion slowly brought his muffin to his mouth. Up above in the sky, the stars were beginning to twinkle.